

Blockade passes off peacefully

The opposition must think of alternatives before more damage is done to the country

WE express our relief at the peaceful passing of the first day of country-wide non-stop blockade programme of the 14-party alliance. While announcing the programme on Saturday night Awami League (AL) President Sheikh Hasina had urged all to observe the programme peacefully, which possibly had a calming effect on the AL supporters. Despite some stray cases of setting fire to vehicles and railway compartments, we feel all the parties concerned showed utmost sagacity in dealing with an otherwise volatile situation, and they deserve some words of praise. At the same time, we would like to praise and thank BNP led 4-party alliance for withdrawing at the last moment their programme of confronting AL on the streets. We sincerely hope that BNP policy makers would continue to make their supporters understand the wisdom of their decision.

The occasion compels us to appeal to the chief election commissioner (CEC) once again to shake off his stubborn stance and yield to the demand of the opposition. He has to bear in mind the fact that his resignation is being demanded by a party (Awami League), that secured 41 per cent of the total votes cast in 2002 elections. The CEC may happen to be holding a constitutional post but he has to take into consideration the ground reality in this case, rejection of his voter list by the Appellate Division and his lack of acceptability to a large number of voters.

The non-stop blockade programme of the opposition is set to bring the wheels of economy to a standstill. This is neither pro-growth, nor pro-people. Therefore, we strongly feel that instead of holding the people hostage for an indefinite period of time, they should come up with some other strategy to impress upon the president/chief adviser of the caretaker government about the urgency of the alliance's 11-point task. The sooner the issues are resolved the easier it will be to address other pressing issues concerning the elections.

ADB withholds grant

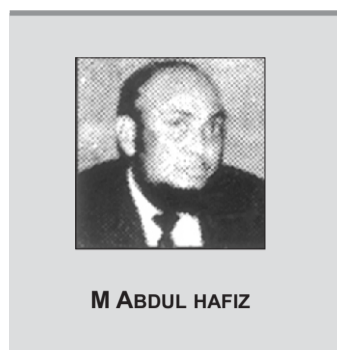
Timely receipt of grant vital for meeting future needs

THE Asian Development Bank has withheld a grant of \$46.5 million for Bangladesh's Power Sector due to the prevailing political unrest in the country. In Bangladesh Takas this amounts to taka 3200 crores. Taking into consideration the current shortfall and the progressive shortfall of 19 per cent a year through the year 2010 the country needs a total 6000 crore takas. Withholding of the grant at this time is therefore likely to seriously hamper development of production of increased need of power and subsequently its distribution. It is learnt that the ADB might take a while in releasing the grant unless the many conditions attached to it like privatization of the various establishments operating under the Power Development Board including bringing down the loss in the sector down to 17 per cent take place. On the other hand, it is doubtful as to how the Caretaker Government can meet much of the laid down conditions. Experts have expressed opinion that in order to keep the pace of our otherwise healthy growth of economy uninterrupted, we have to put in order the Power Sector including the Railway and the Ports. In the meantime, IMF also has released less than its current installment.

We are rather concerned about this development. We urge all concerned to take necessary measures to lessen this volatile situation that is causing serious political unrest and the resultant blow to our economy. Admittedly the present state of the power sector has been perpetuated primarily due to the legacy of bad management by the previous government in particular. However, as of today the onus for bringing about a congenial atmosphere in the political arena towards eliminating the extreme unrest lay mainly on the shoulders of both the major political parties. Let us help the political process in this regard in all possible ways without taking recourse to any form of undue aggressive overtures.

Democracy is what democracy does or achieves. Our political parties must realise that without proper development of the economy democracy may become meaningless to the people at large.

Opposition staying the course?



M ABDUL HAFIZ

AN out-manoeuvred Awami League, willy-nilly, accepted a caretaker arrangement craftily put in place by the BNP and its appointed president, Dr Iajuddin Ahmed, through a typical palace intrigue last month.

The learned professor had no compunction in declaring himself as the candidate for the post of the head of the caretaker government and in quickly taking over the office, apparently to oblige his benefactor who had made an hour and half-long courtesy call on him a day earlier.

He couldn't have been oblivious to the fact that, with this bizarre step, he had dealt a severe blow to the spirit of the concept of the caretaker government. Daunted by the AL's climb-down, the huge bands of opposition activists who took to the streets countrywide to press the demands for electoral reforms, went home disappointed,

PERSPECTIVES

In the meantime, the BNP seems to have gone berserk, as is evident from its violent reaction to the defectors from the party. In an immediate riposte, the BNP desperadoes pounced on the defectors and ransacked their houses and properties. Out of desperation, the BNP is threatening its opponents from other parties also with the language of weapons. It is an irony that, while condemning the AL's "anarchy and violence," the BNP-Jamaat axis is threatening the AL with violent action.

because this wasn't why they had agitated and undergone repression for the last two years.

Perhaps as an after-thought the opposition discovered that it -- in its protracted movement -- had reached a cul-de-sac where there is no way forward. Moreover, the things that unraveled in the wake of Begum Zia's coup-de-main convinced even the conformists that a tinpot head of the caretaker government could deliver anything but a credible election, due early next year.

During the two-year-long electoral reforms movement, there were sceptics who considered AL's charges of election engineering by the alliance government as gross exaggeration or baseless complaining. They have also, now, awakened to the harsh reality after witnessing the unfolding of the alliance's latest game plan, and the conduct of the heads of the caretaker government and the Election Commission.

One doesn't have to stretch one's imagination to understand that almost an octogenarian Professor Iajuddin, burdened with the three hats that he simultaneously wears and with as many as eleven vital ministries, is merely a puppet, the string to which is held by the BNP high command who were responsible for putting him in the exalted position.

It is only natural that he would be at the beck and call of his benefactors to promote their agenda. Enscathed within the precinct of Bangabhaban, he moves and mumbles the way he is dictated to do. If he had courage, he would have listened to the various quarters and political parties who suggested that he hand over at least the office of the head of the caretaker government to a suitable person after exploring all options provided for it in the constitution. He would still be left with his presidency, and the command of the armed

forces. So far he has not been responsive to the suggestion -- thus deepening the crisis. He still shows the penchant for serving the interests of his political masters.

If the president is indeed unable to hold a credible election because of his continued inability, if not reluctance, to bring about drastic changes in the administration and the Election Commission, he will not be able to help the party he belongs to. There are already chinks in the armour of the BNP, which, like a comatose patient, is gasping for breath now. With its voter base shrinking with each passing day as a result of large-scale defection from the party, the BNP is going down-hill. So much so that even a bagpipe general, with his ragtag party, is rethinking his options.

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It is an irony that, while condemning the AL's "anarchy and violence," the BNP-Jamaat axis is threatening the AL with violent action. As a matter of fact, violence is the forte of the BNP-Jamaat axis, which, in the past, had proved itself to be a master at it.

The same axis is believed to be the catalyst for the rise of militancy in the country. An impression still persists that it was directly, or indirectly, behind the August 21 tragedy and the targeted killings of AL leaders and dissident journalists.

It can be equally devoid of scruples for re-entering the citadel of power. Acutely conscious of their present standing with an electorate lashed by the price hike, among many other things, it is clear that the BNP-Jamaat axis has opted for a Machiavellian strategy. With a party-man as a compliant president-cum-caretaker government head, as well as an election commission stuffed with BNP-Jamaat cadres on its side, it wants to hurry through an election of sorts before any meaningful reforms are effected under public pres-

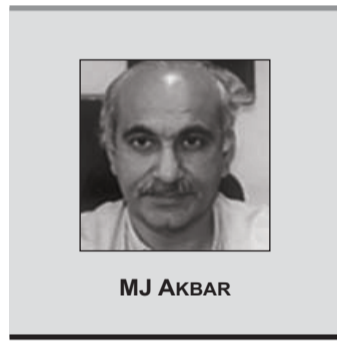
sure. Time will judge the wisdom of AL's earlier vacillation with regard to the question of continuing with the movement late last month. If it has now decided to stay the course, the movement ought to be brought to fruition. The detractors and their agents are actively slurring the name of the AL as being violent and destructive, and finding excuses to provoke public wrath against the party.

Even if the AL chief had used the rhetoric of "baitha-logi" symbolically, the expression can be misinterpreted. It must be shunned to hold the moral high ground. At the peak of the struggle for independence, Bangabandhu called for a non-violent non-cooperation movement, for none knew better than him that violence would only deflect the movement from its central objective.

In the present convoluted political milieu, a deadly confrontation is looming, and the likely disaster facing the nation -- particularly its wobbly economy -- is more than real. So maximum caution needs to be exercised under the worst of provocation. The central objective before the nation is that of a credible election, and by no means the upping of the ante. At the end of the day, the truth has a strange way of surviving the worst of times.

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

Hollow triumphs



MJ AKBAR

GEORGE Bush is still president of America, so who or what has been defeated in the electoral upsurge that gave Democrats a majority in both the Senate and the House of Representatives last week? The shift in power marks the defeat of triumphalism as state policy. What is triumphalism?

Its core is shaped by the triumph of the individual over the institution. Anyone who wins an election is tempted towards semidivinity. When victory is unusual, or against heavy odds, the tendency is strengthened. Both George Bush and Tony Blair had to challenge more than just a ruling party to win. Bush, moreover, lost the popular vote and scraped through on the dubious strength of a few chads. He was re-elected by the amazing incompetence of an otherwise intelligent challenger. How much closer can you get to belief in a divine mission?

American government is shaped hugely by the character and predilections of an elected president, but George Bush could not have pushed through his Iraq war agenda without a compliant

BYLINE

The answer to triumphalism is good, old-fashioned realism. It took defeat at home to wake up from what can literally be described as his dream-world. But he could be more formidable awake than he was when drugged by the likes of Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, if he accepts the rationale of realism in the remaining two years of his term. If he uses the undoubted power of his office to create a new balance across the world, he could seed a new order that his successor can nurture.

legislature. He conceived this war in fantasy and pursued it in illusion. The legislature could have acted as a reality check; it did not.

Bush veiled illusion with aggressive morality. The logic was forceful: I have been invaded, hence I am sincere; I am sincere, therefore I am right; I am right, therefore I am good; I am good, therefore any opposition to me is evil. My war is God's justice and America's salvation. Any opposition to my occupation of a sovereign nation must be irrational, barbaric, or terrorist.

The problem with triumphalism is that it collapses without triumph. The term derives from the triumphs that the Roman Senate accorded to military heroes. But to deserve a triumph you had to be a Caesar. There is no laurel that was ever designed for an empty head. Bush could afford the smile of a Caesar when Saddam Hussein was defeated three years ago and the insurgency had not begun. That, incidentally, was the moment when he could have negotiated a withdrawal with a new Iraqi government. He had ended the Saddam dictatorship. But he stayed on to

conquer Iraq. When success is elusive, politicians tend to console themselves with the illusion of success. From there it is one step towards selling a lie through manipulation of minds.

War is a harsh environment. Death demands explanation and justification. There is collateral anger if death is seen as senseless. The pressures of democracy are corrosive. Governments always have to sell their decisions. But when they resort to communication malpractice they may buy the present but they inevitably sell the future.

Cleverness prevails over wisdom. Bush has been a master of the politics of democracy. He has exploited his personal weaknesses brilliantly: he has defined his naiveté as a form of sincerity. You never know what tricks the brainiacs are conjuring up to fool the ordinary voter!

Bush has won three elections by exploiting the power of the ordinary, but success has been sustained by a devious rhetoric.

Terrorism and al-Qaeda are critically serious threats, but they are also complex. A war against

them needs commitment, conviction and above all honesty of purpose. It is honesty that enables parents to live with the coffins of dead sons and daughters, whether they are wrapped in the American flag or draped in an Iraqi shroud. Any dishonesty, or even the perception of it, extracts a terrible revenge. Bush was exposed gradually, in a dribble of news reports, articles, and books which destroyed his thesis that he had occupied Iraq to save Americans from terrorism. Americans were ready for sacrifice against terrorists; they were shocked when they realised that their moral and military resources were being consumed by a different agenda. An intelligence estimate, on the eve of the elections, that the war in Iraq had actually increased the threat of terrorism rather than decreased it was perhaps the final straw that tipped the balance away from Bush.

The Bush linkage between al-Qaeda and Iraq was made through Islam. It was cheap tactic that had the lifespan of a tawdry lie. For a while it worked: for the American heartland the fact that both were "Islamic" was enough.

Bush created an "Islamic" enemy because in that imprecise haze he could conjure up whichever demons he wished. Over time, the brew consisted of inaccurate history and demonic myth stirred in a large cauldron of fear. It was not just the use of "crusaders." That might have been a genuine slip of the mind, for all I know; and in any case it was the Church and Christian princes who drenched Jerusalem in knee-deep blood before they were defeated in a war that lasted two centuries. More relevant was the conscious and repeated use of terms like "Islamic fascism" and some mysterious Caliphate that hovered like a monstrous threat over western civilisation.

A cursory analysis would have revealed the weakness of the construct. Islam is 1,400 years old. Fascism appeared on the map of Europe with Mussolini in 1920. So whatever else fascism may or may not be, it certainly cannot be Islamic. Yes, it is absolutely true that there have been many Muslims who have been fascists. But why blame Islam for the sins of Muslims? No one blames the Vatican for Mussolini, or the Church for apartheid although the white racists of South Africa were churchgoers.

The Caliphate, like the Holy Roman Emperor, is a concept from the age of empire. It is a pre-nation state institution which has outlived its utility in the contemporary age of nationalism. It was abolished by a man who can justly claim to be the father of post-empire Muslim nation states, Mustafa Kemal Ghazi. It

was Mustafa Kemal who saved Turkey from partition and virtual annihilation by the British after Turkey's defeat in the First World War, even while the Caliph was trying to save his dynasty's skin at the cost of his country. If al-Qaeda uses this term then it only goes to prove how distant it is from ground reality.

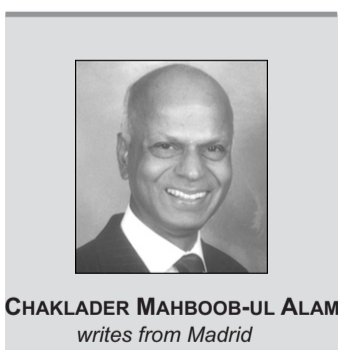
But the conversion of Islam into the enemy had another purpose: it obscured the fact that the principal -- though not the sole -- motivation of the Iraq insurgency was nationalism.

The answer to triumphalism is good, old-fashioned realism. It took defeat at home to wake up from what can literally be described as his dream-world. But he could be more formidable awake than he was when drugged by the likes of Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, if he accepts the rationale of realism in the remaining two years of his term. If he uses the undoubted power of his office to create a new balance across the world, he could seed a new order that his successor can nurture. (Blair's successor will be in office within months.)

Bush has spent the last three years waging war against Iraq. He will need, at the very least, to spend his next two years doing something even more dramatic: discovering the difficult route to peace with Iran and healing the very deep, very painful wounds that Israel has inflicted upon Palestine. That would be a genuine triumph.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

Reforming the UN



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM
writes from Madrid

AT the end of the Second World War, most of Europe and many other parts of the world lay in ruins. Everybody knew that the old world order in which the European colonial powers held sway over much of the world had virtually come to an end.

Although Britain and France were still theoretically considered as big powers, there was no illusion that the old order could be restored. The United States and the Soviet Union had come out of the conflict as the real super-powers. They had not only won

LETTER FROM EUROPE

The small countries want an effective United Nations for their safety and security. That is why public opinion in these countries is strongly in favour of reforming the UN. The permanent members of the Council, in particular the US, do not want a strong UN. But this is a short-sighted policy because no other organization except the UN can shield the US from the world's resentment and anger against its hegemonic position. No other organization can give greater legitimacy to international actions for the maintenance of international peace and security than the UN. So a compromise formula should be worked out.

the war but also acquired vast empires, or vast spheres of influence.

A new world order was emerging which would be characterized by intense super-power rivalry from the very beginning. Yet, there was a general consensus of opinion that the world needed an international organization to maintain peace and security among nations. This is the principal reason why the United Nations Organization (UNO) came into being at San Francisco

in 1945.

Of course, the UN had other objectives as well, like promoting friendly relations among nations based on the principle of sovereign equality of its members; supporting self-determination of the peoples of the world; achieving international co-operation in solving international economic, social, cultural and humanitarian problems and above all, providing an international forum for peaceful discussion on disputes.

Despite heavy criticism from

interested quarters it must be admitted that, during its 61 years of existence, the UN has done remarkably well in these fields. But unfortunately, in trying to fulfill its principal objective i.e. maintaining peace and security, it has been quite ineffective. So the question is: How can we make the UN more effective?

Many ideas have been put forward. In the spring of 2005, Kofi Annan, the UN secretary general made a proposal which, until now, seems to be the most

comprehensive one. All these ideas and proposals have one thing in common i.e. reforming the Security Council because, according to the Charter, the primary responsibility of that body is to maintain international peace and security.

The UN is not a democratic institution and the Security Council reflects that reality. It was structured in such a manner that the real power on matters of peace and war would always remain in the hands of the so-called big five. Even though 192 countries constitute the UN, only 15 can sit on the Council of whom the big five (US, UK, France, Russia, and China) hold permanent seats. Although, in principle, a majority vote plus one vote is needed to reach a decision on all important matters, a veto by a permanent member will invalidate any decision. The Council has remained largely ineffective because of the veto power.

Actually, the single most important reason for the failure of the United Nations to maintain

international peace and security is, no doubt, the permanent members' veto power. They have used this power so many times to block action against their allies and proteges, to the detriment of the interests of justice and security, that the UN has been converted into a debating forum which is unable to act decisively in the face of international crises.

The permanent members have refused to give up their veto powers. Instead, proposals have been made to give permanent seats to other major economic powers like Germany, Japan, India, etc. Others have suggested that adequate representation should be given to the Muslim world. Yet others feel that continents like Africa and South America should always be represented on the Council as permanent members.

The Security Council with its five permanent members portrays the immediate post World War II situation. It is always a good idea to bring it up to date so that it can represent the eco-

nomic, political and strategic realities of today, by expanding it to include more countries. In this manner the Council will certainly look more democratic, but if the veto system is maintained the UN will remain crippled as before.

So it is imperative to find another alternative. That would inevitably mean giving more powers to the General Assembly when the Council fails to take action in removing threats to international peace and security. The achievement of this objective would require patient negotiations among the members. All members except the veto power holders would naturally like decisions to be taken by simple majority, or some sort of weighted majority vote. But it is highly unlikely that the big five who hold veto powers would ever accept a voting system of this nature.

The small countries want an effective United Nations for their safety and security. That is why public opinion in these countries is strongly in favour of reforming the UN. The permanent members

of the Council, in particular the US, do not want a strong UN. But this is a short-sighted policy because no other organization except the UN can shield the US from the world's resentment and anger against its hegemonic position.

No other organization can give greater legitimacy to international actions for the maintenance of international peace and security than the UN. So a compromise formula should be worked out.

One possible formula could be, if a resolution is rejected twice by the Council through the exercise of a veto, it should then be forwarded to the General Assembly which should have the power to override the decision of the Council by a two-thirds majority of all its members. This system will be a little more democratic than the current one and will certainly make the UN more effective. Will the permanent members accept such a compromise?

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star.