

Caretaker government's latest initiative

Move in the right direction

RECONSTITUTION of the Election Commission (EC) has been the most contentious issue that led to the ever-growing political unrest all over the country in recent times. Though belated, the caretaker government's announcement of holding dialogues with political parties with a view to overcoming the impasse has been welcomed by the entire nation. A specially constituted committee headed by Dr. Akbar Ali Khan has already held discussions with the leaders of the 14-party and 4-party alliances and also with Jatiyo Party (Ershad) and Liberal Democratic Party.

It may not be out of place to mention here that the present caretaker government (CG) is facing the most complicated crisis since inception of the system in 1996. It is therefore a moral and an ethical obligation on the part of all the political parties to lend all out support to the CG irrespective of individual or partisan considerations.

Over the past several days we have been witnessing a kind of turmoil in the country the kind of which we have not witnessed since independence. Lives have been lost, private and public properties destroyed, trade and business brought to a halt causing untold sufferings to the majority of the country's peace loving population. We have been incurring huge loss in almost every sector due to the blockade.

We therefore appeal to all concerned for an all round calm, sense and sensibility to prevail over undue display of militant and confrontational attitudes by the political parties as well as the law enforcing agencies. As for the Chief Adviser he should deal with the controversy over the issue of the chief election commissioner decisively. After all, it is the EC more than any other institution that is central to holding of a proper and a credible election.

We thus urge the political parties and all concerned to rise above any narrow partisan interests and work unitedly to make the dialogue a success. After all nothing can be bigger than the country. We simply cannot afford to miss this opportunity.

Political appointees must leave on their own

Will reflect government's nonparty character

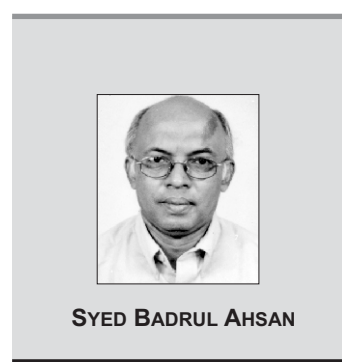
IT is not uncommon for governments to appoint people of choice in various positions in government and semi-government organisations. These people are generally apparatchiks belonging to the party to whom the favour is doled out as a recompense for his or her service to the party or, as we have seen in the case of Bangladesh, because of the person's proximity to the party high-ups or being related to them. We have seen that being the criterion for selection of ambassadors, heads of semi-government organisation or of sport body, to name only a few. We have seen this being done by all the governments in power, military and democratic alike. In some cases the race was to outdo the previous government.

It is not always a bad thing though and sometimes expertise of the appointee in certain specialised areas can very well be utilised by the government that advances the interest of the country. But we feel that the political appointees should leave their respective jobs on their own once the caretaker government has taken over, primarily for two reasons. That he or she will otherwise lose the confidence of his or her colleagues and subordinates who are bound to give him or her an oblique look, being an appointee of the 'last regime'. Secondly, that will allow the administration to shed the 'politicised' tag. While political appointment is a practice in other countries also in our case the choices have been patently irrational, the person's competence so utterly poor, and the misuse of the position so blatant that their appointment in many cases proved to be a bane for the country.

The worst sufferers of the practice are our various bodies and organisations headed by political appointees. With some exceptions most were not even familiar with the nature of the job that they were responsible to perform.

We have seen one such appointee volunteer his resignation. Hopefully, others will take his cue and follow suit.

The general, the CEC and the story of lies



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

CHIEF Election Commissioner MA Aziz has, rather disappointingly, not had anything to say about General Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury's pithy remark on lies. The general, now one of the advisors in a beleaguered caretaker government, has told us he did not lie about his meeting with Aziz. And he said that in firm, gentlemanly, convincing fashion.

There was a sense of relief all around the country when he thus simply exposed yet one more truth about the stubborn man who refuses to cave in to public opinion and make his way out of the Election Commission. The CEC, having alternately amused and outraged the country in the past many months with his behaviour, has fallen eerily silent. It is a pity, for we would have loved to have his riposte to General Mashhud. He does not appear to have any, which is why we now conclude definitively that the advisor did not lie.

Once we have established that truth, it will be for us to go full-scale into the debate of whether an individual guilty of lying ought to be allowed to cling to a position of public trust. Despite the shameful manner in which the BNP-Jamaat people are exhorting Aziz to hang in there, despite the predictable and repeated invocations of the constitution by Aziz and his

GROUND REALITIES

Once we have established that truth, it will be for us to go full-scale into the debate of whether an individual guilty of lying ought to be allowed to cling to a position of public trust. Despite the shameful manner in which the BNP-Jamaat people are exhorting Aziz to hang in there, despite the predictable and repeated invocations of the constitution by Aziz and his Machiavellian friends in the recently departed government relating to his position, there is still the paramount need for the campaign against the CEC and his colleagues to be sustained.

Machiavellian friends in the recently departed government relating to his position, there is still the paramount need for the campaign against the CEC and his colleagues to be sustained and strengthened in order for these men to leave, eventually. That campaign, we can now report, can be re-energized through tackling head on the untruth that now has a witness in Mashhud Chowdhury. Let the job be undertaken, in dead earnest.

And in dead earnest too let us now go into a recapitulation of all the lies and all the obfuscations we in Bangladesh have been treated to since the violent overthrow of constitutional government in August 1975. It will make us sad, it will cause deep disquiet in our souls yet once again, it will sear our hearts and singe our minds. But it is a road we need to travel through all over again, in our own collective interest.

Remember the lie the BNP-wallahs and their friends peddled before the 2001 elections about turning the judiciary into a truly independent branch of the state once they regained office? That promise, if it was at all a promise, was never kept. Ask Moudud Ahmed, ask him about the number of times he promised the Supreme Court that he and his friends would

do the job, that they would make us proud of what they would do.

They did not do a thing, and only reinforced our conviction that the lies upon which the country embarked in 1975 would go on making a mess of our world. The venerable Tajuddin Ahmed and his colleagues saw the life going out of them in November 1975 barely hours after a right-wing Bengali journalist claimed to be in possession of a letter implying an Indian conspiracy to smuggle free Bangladesh's first prime minister out of prison and install him as head of a new government. No one saw the letter the journalist claimed to have had in his hands. Years later, he told inquisitive men with a straight face that someone had taken the letter from him and he had not seen it since. You are right to ask: Was there a letter at all?

It was just one of the many lies that caused Bengalis so much grief in 1975. Do not forget the mendacity that went into the vilification of General Khaled Musharraf once he assumed power on November 3 and that went on for a good many years after his assassination by Zia loyalists on November 7. He was, said the dark elements who seized the state once again on the morning Musharraf died, an Indo-Soviet agent; and the editor of the state-

owned Bangladesh Times cheered the "defeat" of the Delhi-Moscow axis through the killings of the four national leaders and the patriotic officers who had sent Moshitque and his murderer-soldiers packing.

Let there be no mistake about it. All these instances of lying have been low points in our national life and have, in large measure, contributed to the low self-esteem we clearly happen to be suffering from these days. In his time, General Ziaur Rahman bottled up the truth about our history by clamping curbs on all mention of Bangabandhu and the War of Liberation, by making sure that state-controlled media did not refer to the "Pakistan occupation army" but only to an "occupation army."

His political heirs, beginning with his spouse and snaking all the way down to the men he pulled into his Bangladesh Nationalist Party, have done worse. Zia, they keep saying, declared Bangladesh's independence on March 26, 1971. That is a terrible lie to propagate, for these men and women of constricted minds do not tell their followers that Zia made the announcement on behalf of Bangabandhu. The lie is manifest in the failure of these anti-

historical elements to broadcast the Zia message as it was heard over Shwadin Bangla Betar. The record of the speech is out there, but they will not touch it for fear the lie cannot be sustained if it is brought before the country.

The result has been a deeply divided, wounded society. A whole generation of Bengali men and women, born after liberation, has come of age through a palpable process of peddling of political untruth. It is a misguided generation you deal with. But why blame these young only? There are freedom fighters who, having seen fit to link up with the BNP, have repudiated the national leadership that waged the war in 1971. These muktiyoddhas sang songs about Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as they marched into battle. Today, in embarrassing fashion for you and me, and without blinking, they denigrate his legacy.

This propensity to jettison truth and build a lie, layer upon layer, has with surprising efficiency been encouraged over the years and has indeed been made to encompass wider areas of politics. In 1986, the Awami League and the BNP, determined to chip away at the Ershad autocracy, decided to challenge him through a sharing of constituencies between themselves at the elections he had called earlier. And as Sheikh Hasina publicly stated her party decision to take part in the elections, Khaleda Zia remained inexplicably silent, ultimately to stay away from the election. Thus was born the lie of "Awami League treachery." No one spoke of the wickedness of the "Bangladeshi" nationalists.

In all the decades since the mid-1970s, Bengali society has lived on lies. The imam of the local mosque General Ershad offered his Friday prayers in had known

for days, if not weeks, that the military ruler would be there to remember Allah. That did not deter the dictator from lying to the congregation about a "dream" he had had the preceding night, one that had him praying in that mosque. The lie could not but have left the Almighty profoundly worried about Creation.

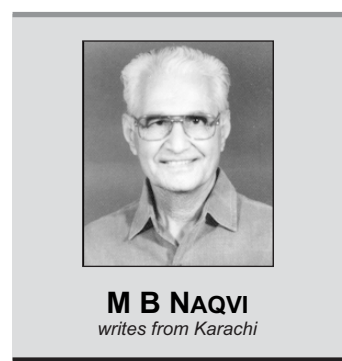
What else can you say here? Ah, yes --- that it is the habit with dictators to lie all the time. And there are all the equally bad men to keep them company. The lying habit gets to be so deeply entrenched under authoritarian regimes that once they pass from the scene, some of the civilians who step into the corridors of power are inclined to copy the trend.

Bangladesh, said many of the functionaries of the BNP-Jamaat government in their day, was a land of communal harmony. Was it? When Begum Zia and her friends took charge in October 2001, their followers shrieked warlike and busily went about assaulting Hindu families across Bangladesh. It was, in many ways, a throwback to what the Pakistan army did to an earlier generation of Hindus, back in 1971. When, therefore, you say your Hindus and Christians and Buddhists are happy in circumstances where every effort is being expended to have a secular state mutate into a Muslim or Islamic republic, you are lying. Do not mistake their silence for good cheer. Intimidation is no recipe for happiness.

The lies will go on, until you have good men and women, courageous enough to run the predators around us out of town, arise to tell us that it is possible to dream of a Golden Bengal once again.

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A political likelihood?



M B NAQVI

writes from Karachi

ALTHOUGH general elections are a whole year away, main political actors are already in election mode, examining and re-examining their strategies. Shaheen Sehba's recent Washington despatch may have made a PPP-Musharraf patch up easier.

On taking Pakistan along the path of Modern and Moderate Islam there is convergence between Pakistan Peoples Party and President Pervez Musharraf. This can bring the two together. For Musharraf it is a near compulsion.

Ruling coalition of parties, except for MQM, need Musharraf's support to return to parliament. (The MQM can, certainly, return to any Assembly; it only needs Altaf Hussain's support). Others, deserters from different parties, command little respect or willing votes. The president needs the support of a party that can win an election on its own and PPP fits the bill. The image of PML (Q) crowd is that of toadies of the army.

But there are formidable difficulties before PPP and Musharraf

PLAIN WORDS

Opposition's first task is to force the military out of politics. It is a daunting task, especially for non-militant organizations while its military opponents will love nothing more than a violent opposition. Why? Because it will be so much easier to crush a rag-tag but violent opposition. Violent political struggles can only result at most in replacing one dictatorship with another. It can scarcely establish a democracy. Pakistan needs a wise opposition.

can reconcile. The Army, Musharraf and PML(N) have done too much propaganda of corruption against Benazir Bhutto, PPP and Asif Ali Zardari.

Musharraf happens to think he must control most levers of power; he cannot afford to fail in any election to the presidency; this requires that elections must return his supporters' majority in all the assemblies.

The other side comprises Benazir Bhutto -- and PPP. Her ego requires Musharraf-like powers or at least the pomp and show of a prime ministership, if the substance of power is to elude. Somehow, an election-winning PPP supporting an all-powerful president, with BB taking no office, seems incongruous. Besides, Musharraf strongly dislikes Bhuttos. That is a hurdle.

Three major political forces oppose Musharraf: PPP, PML(N) and MMA. They have hitherto chased a shadow: one-point unity to topple Musharraf and also perhaps to drive out the army from political arena. On Moderate and Modern Islam versus traditional orthodoxies, there is no common ground; Islamic reality is all sectar-

ian orthodoxies. To any traditionalist, moderate Islam is not Islam, whatever else it may be. Not only MMA will oppose modern and moderate Islam, so will many in Q League or even PML (N). By mere introduction of Hudood Ordinance Amendment Bill, Musharraf has killed the idea of a grand opposition alliance.

A PNA-like opposition is no longer attainable; today's context is different. This democracy, being a passing show, exists because of the general's need for: (a) protocol convenience in meeting foreign heads of government or state, and (b) desire for legitimacy. Many foreigners want to see democracy in Pakistan. But most do not count, while the US does. Does the US insist on transparently free elections in 2007?

Why forget that Bush Administration has been happy with Musharraf's 'real' democracy. But come the Taliban upsurge in Afghanistan, a loud chorus by the US generals, Karzai and the ISAF's British commander have gone up that Pakistan is not nabbing Taliban the way it hounds al-Qaeda. US officials have thus begun emphasizing the need for

'transparent' election in 2007. It seems to be a pressure tactic after Pakistan's another U turn to make peace with Taliban in North Waziristan. Another agreement was to be signed with Bajaur 'elders' on the very day of the Bajaur air strike.

It has curiously not been publicized that President Bush had asserted the US right to hit a target in Pakistan if there was an al-Qaeda or Taliban leader there. Furthermore, reports are circulating on internet that Pakistan has agreed to Nato forces' right of hot pursuit into Pakistan territory. If true, this will transform Tribal Areas and Balochistan politics; war will have traveled from Afghanistan to this country.

It is clear that these elections are meant to complete Musharraf's political architecture by making him secure till November 2012. The army can ensure "positive" results. But such exercises leave people incredulous; instead of giving legitimacy to winners, such results widen rulers' credibility gap. No one took any of the last five general elections since 1988 seriously; they were attributed to intelligence

services' "managing" to produce "positive" results.

In the next national polls, Musharraf's men will ensure results that the army chief desires. But is Bush administration's desire for "transparent" and "free" election new? By now Islamabad would know what do the Americans want by "transparency" and "freedom" when they talk of the polls. Should there be a deal between Musharraf and BB and the latter takes part in the election, will not then Americans regard the polls as transparent and free? Wouldn't Musharraf, Bush and BB be happy, provided such a deal can actually be done?

PPP and Musharraf not only agree on the necessity for a Modern, Moderate Islam, but both are pro-American in equal measure. Their economic policies are no different; apart from personality factors, Benazir would be at ease with Shaukat Aziz. No major foreign policy difference exists with Musharraf, not even over India and Afghan policies.

Socially, both belong to elite groups. The only possible difference of views can be over the concept of democracy or shape of the constitution. But BB had accepted to become prime minister twice between 1988 and 1993 under a constitution that was in force then. Indeed, she accepted many totally arbitrary conditions imposed on her by Gen Aslam Beg and President Gh Khan in 1988 like who will be foreign and finance ministers or who will run the foreign policy in Afghanistan and India.

PPP has, however, to think of many things. 1999 was the

army's own coup. Musharraf aims at perpetuating military domination over the political life. PPP has retained its credibility by remaining in opposition. Its joining the regime, necessarily on latter's terms, will cost it dear; whether or not Musharraf gains legitimacy, PPP will certainly lose some of its own by accepting military's terms.

Opposition's first task is to force the military out of politics. It is a daunting task, especially for non-militant organizations while its military opponents will love nothing more than a violent opposition. Why? Because it will be so much easier to crush a rag-tag but violent opposition. Violent political struggles can only result at most in replacing one dictatorship with another. It can scarcely establish a democracy. Pakistan needs a wise opposition.

Given that one-point unity among major opposition parties is now out of the question, two opposing political alignments are possible: one that wants to promote modernism and moderation among Muslims and the other will comprise orthodoxies promoting traditionalist Islam. Since there are over a hundred orthodoxies, they should be left alone to sort out how can they unite and work together.

Two such alignments can be, logically, Musharraf and BB's PPP for modern and moderate Islam, while MMA can easily coalesce with PML (Q) and most of PML (N) -- if indeed PML (N) and PML (Q) can again work together. Is it too neat to be practical?

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Diplomacy, Dhaka-style



HARUN UR RASHID

MANY people in Bangladesh are surprised and puzzled as to why foreign diplomats, especially from the US and the European countries, have been involved in election matters that are essentially an internal affair of the country. Diplomats are rarely involved in internal matters such as the election to the parliament of a sovereign country.

Functions of diplomatic missions

The functions of diplomats have been codified and described in the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. Article 3 of the Convention, for ready reference is quoted below:

BOTTOM LINE

It is reasonable to assume that weak or failed states are the source of many of the world's serious and intractable problems, such as terrorism. Conducting war on terrorism is the primary goal of many Western states. It seems that, prompted by the considerations stated above, some foreign diplomats have been engaged in involving themselves in an entirely internal matter of Bangladesh. It is the political situation in the country that allows them to interfere in a domestic matter. Bangladeshis have to blame themselves for creating this situation.

"The functions of a diplomatic mission consist, inter alia, in:

- (a) Representing the sending state in the receiving state;
- (b) Protecting in the receiving state the interests of the sending state and of its nationals, within the limits permitted by international law;
- (c) Negotiating with the government of the receiving state;
- (d) Ascertaining by all lawful means conditions and developments in the receiving state, and reporting thereon to the government of the sending state; and
- (e) Promoting friendly relations between the sending state and the receiving state, and developing their economic, cultural and scientific relations."

If we examine carefully, it is clear that the above (d) sub-clause allows a diplomatic mission to ascertain the "conditions and developments" in the receiving state and to report to its home government. Full stop.

This means that a diplomatic mission can only ascertain and report the conditions of the receiving country to its home government. Any other action a diplomatic mission takes would obviously raise serious concern among the majority of the people in Bangladesh. This is because it would be seen as direct interference in the domestic matters of Bangladesh, which is not permissible under Article 2(7) of the UN Charter.

Every citizen in the country

wants a free, fair and peaceful election in accordance with the constitution and laws. The political leaders understand that. A foreign diplomat urging leaders of the political parties to ensure the same is perceived by many in the country to be just a "photo opportunity."

The question raging in the minds of the majority of the people is whether a diplomatic mission is permitted to perform the kind of functions that some of the diplomatic missions are vigorously carrying out, with fanfare in the media, in election matters in Bangladesh.

It is assumed that diplomatic missions know their position in terms of the rules of the Vienna

Convention, therefore, the question is: why are some of them involved in the internal matters of Bangladesh?

Why are they doing so?

Are they doing so for protecting their national interests? It appears to be so, and some of the reasons that deserve mention are as follows:

First, confrontational politics in the country has made it easier for foreign diplomats to involve themselves as "wise persons" in a domestic matter. The major disagreements that currently exist between major parties with regard to conducting fair, free and peaceful election lead to a common-sense conclusion that violence is most likely to erupt among party supporters during election time. It is sad that diplomats have to advise the political leaders to shun violent politics.

Second, Bangladesh is an aid receiving country and, therefore, they think they have political leverage on Bangladesh. This implies that they think they have an "implicit right" to interfere in domestic matters because their aid and loans are provided to the country for economic and social development. Since the aid or loans are their tax-payers' money,

they argue that financial contributions should reach the target. Political instability and violence would impede achieving the stated goal.

Third, the development agenda for many aid-giving countries and international financial institutions shifted dramatically during the last ten years. They want strong institutions and good governance for economic and social development in a country. It is not incorrect to say that aid-giving nations see that some governments in developing countries, including Bangladesh, are characterized by the use of political power to serve a network of supporters of the country's leaders.

Furthermore, Bangladesh is perceived as having weak government institutions. Endemic corruption, coupled with distorted values, has sapped the vitality and integrity of many institutions in the country. The essence of strong institutions is enforcement of rule of law, irrespective of the social status of a person.

Fourth, many proponents of the 1990s Washington Consensus (emphasis on fiscal discipline, privatization, and public spending for health, education and infrastructure for economic growth) now say that they understand the importance of strong institutions,

rule of law and good governance in economic development. Milton Friedman, dean of orthodox free market economists, in 2002 revised his view in underscoring the importance of making the transition from socialism to free market. He wrote: "I was wrong. It turns out that the rule of law is probably more basic than privatization."

Fifth, some of the aid-giving countries think that weak states, or failed states, are a threat to global stability. They argue that weak states are the source of many of the world's most serious problems, from poverty to Aids to drugs to terrorism.

Sixth, Bangladesh could not show itself to be free of terrorist activities because of a few extreme militant organisations. It is commendable that some of the principal militant leaders or actors have been arrested, and that some of them have been convicted.

Finally, the concept of sovereignty has undergone changes. Since the international community is an inter-connected world, a country's instability, or political vacuum, invariably has an adverse impact on others. The newly developing concept of international public policy tends to

diminish sovereignty of a country, and there appears to be no reasonable excuse for a weak, or a failed, state not to endure interference from other states in domestic matters.

For example, weak states such as East Timor or Solomon Islands in the Pacific have led to serious instability in the area, and Australia had to send troops to calm the situation. Australia was concerned that political instability and violence in the island-states would de-stabilize the region, including Australia.

It is reasonable to assume that weak or failed states are the source of many of the world's serious and intractable problems, such as terrorism. Conducting war on terrorism is the primary goal of many Western states.

It seems that, prompted by the considerations stated above, some foreign diplomats have been engaged in involving themselves in an entirely internal matter of Bangladesh. It is the political situation in the country that allows them to interfere in a domestic matter. Bangladeshis have to blame themselves for creating this situation.

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