

CA's new proposal

Will it help resolve the crises?

PRESIDENT and chief adviser of the caretaker government Iajuddin Ahmed's latest proposal to appoint two more election commissioners came as a surprise to the nation on Saturday, and not quite as a solution to the present political impasse. He has informed his advisers that he would address the nation anytime in the next few days. Reacting to the new development the 14-party alliance, which has been demanding removal of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) MA Aziz said that they were ready to accept the proposal if only the new commissioners would replace the CEC and Commissioner Zakaria. It remains to be seen how the president intends to pacify the parties wrangling over the issue of reconstitution of the Election Commission (EC).

Once again, the president/chief adviser side-tracked his advisers. Instead of making his proposal public following the advisory council meeting, either in the morning or late evening, it was made public after his meeting with the former prime minister Khaleda Zia, who made an unscheduled call on him.

The nation continues to remain in a state of suspended animation in the prevailing political imbroglio, and we feel no time would be better than this for the president to come out with his thoughts before the people on how to reach a peaceful solution. We therefore would like to say this to the president that the entire nation is now looking up to him as his speech will decisively influence the goings on. The people expect to see reflections of his wisdom, judgement and experience as a scholar and a teacher in circumventing the grave situation rising above everything.

We are sure by now the president has had the opportunity to understand the flaws that remain in the voter list prepared by the Election Commission (EC) and the conduct of the chief election commissioner since taking office. Therefore, the people would expect to hear something about these two issues from him.

We agree that the president's task is not easy, given the highly virulent political rivalry between the two major political parties. He is apparently stuck between BNP's emphasis on adherence to the constitution and the Awami League's insistence on the removal of the CEC. We understand the imperative to go by the constitution but it is equally true that the caretaker government cannot ignore the demands regarding fundamental changes in the EC.

All said and done, the fact remains that any misjudgement of the situation by the president will push the country over the edge.

Illegal trafficking

Haul up the syndicate

ILLEGAL trafficking abroad of men and women is nothing new. The media had reported such incidents on many other occasions in the past. The other day as many as 31 poor innocent women were stopped from boarding a Libya bound flight while they were on their way to seek employment overseas that would have changed their lives and of their families' for the better. Apparently these women were stopped from boarding on the grounds that they had fake documents including so-called work permits.

We maintain that those who are responsible for the miseries caused to these poor women are not only vicious, they also happen to be ruthless traders in human miseries. Such acts should be condemned. The worst sufferers in such trafficking are the women, for whom it is not only a colossal loss in financial terms but also a stigma, with which they have to live the rest of their lives. All such "fortune seekers" abroad almost routinely sell their properties and assets to pay for the trip, now they have become paupers.

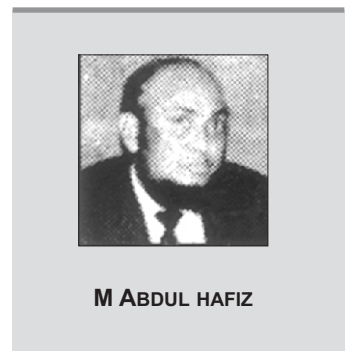
We strongly feel that a vicious syndicate of recruiting agencies, immigration officials including staff and officials of the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare could very well be involved. We wonder as to why no corrective measures have been taken as yet despite the fact that time and again the media had brought to light incidences of such trafficking in which the names of some recruiting agencies were also revealed. Yet it is apparent that the administration chose to either look the other way or ignore the entire matter.

We urge the administration to deal with these criminals sternly and without mercy, and without fear or favour, who continue to trade in such human miseries. It is indeed sad that Bangladesh, which has otherwise made considerable progress in various socio-economic fields, continue to struggle to overcome such demeaning and debilitating acts that lead to serious violations of human rights.

It is our belief that given the resolve combined with proper moral and ethical calling, it should not be difficult for the administration to put a stop to this scourge of illegal trafficking of innocent and helpless men and women.

Actions should be taken sooner rather than later.

BNP: Defending the indefensible



M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE BNP once held all the aces of Bangladesh politics. In the aftermath of August tragedy in 1975, a motley collection of disparate politicians from background as diverse as far right and extreme left saw their common platform in this party founded by the late General Ziaur Rahman.

Building upon the mistakes of Awami League, that spearheaded the country's independence struggle but later fell from the grace, the BNP soon came off with flying colours and forged ahead triumphantly. To the party credit, it ruled the country for the maximum period of its existence.

At the peak of its political ascendancy, the BNP in 2001 came to power with a spectacular mandate of two-thirds majority. Belying the notion that such a victory gives one a measure of magnanimity and sobriety, it gave BNP a dose of megalomania, prompting it to turn imperious.

PERSPECTIVES

But if history is any guide, all these arrangements can be swept away within the twinkling of an eye. The people tasted enough of BNP-Jamaat's rule -- their plunder, repression, price hike of essentials, deprivation public utility services, particularly of power and water, the discrimination, injustice, cruelty, and so on. They are ready to take on their onslaught. All they need is leadership!

In a cavalier intolerance, the party tended to be dismissive of any opposition to its authority and stifled dissent even within its ranks. From day one of its assumption of power -- a meticulously planned repression was put in place to clip the wings of Awami League, its principal adversary, and cut it down to size once for all. As a result the ideals the BNP originally propounded were no more.

Its election planks of eradicating corruption and doing away with terrorism proved to be empty promises. The party itself indulged in an unprecedented orgy of plunder by fostering a culture of cronyism to the exclusion even of many insiders. Owing mainly to this and plethora of other grievances, there were cracks in the citadel of BNP, which is now crumbling. Obviously its Maginot Line of defence is already breached.

After a spell of poor governance during the last five years, resulting in indescribable public misery, the

BNP, while handing the power over to an interim government left the country's body politic mutilated. It will take long for it to heal up. It will take longer for the people to get over the trauma of BNP misrule that continuous to haunt them like a nightmare.

The period witnessed the country's four consecutive world championships in corruption, rise of the religious militancy, and the gruesome episodes like August 21 grenade attack, countrywide simultaneous bombing, and numerous targeted killings of opposition leaders, teachers, journalists, and intellectuals.

All these BNP legacies couldn't dampen the party's fond hope of returning to power again. Even if the public has decisively turned its back to BNP for its continued misrule, bringing the country to the brink, and the BNP has little to defend with regard to its standing with people, its stalwarts are still hopeful of hoodwinking the simple folk with their cunning, which is

unmatched by any of their rivals.

The BNP's election winning weapons -- those of intrigue, chicanery, and trickery are accurate and lethal. They are now on display, one after another. In the first place, it has a very well doctored election mechanism, with layers of contingency plans. As a matter of fact, an edition of BNP-Jamaat government is still place with a compliant president-cum-chief adviser as well as an equally subservient chief election commissioner, neither of whom would act without clearance from party high command which appointed them.

But that's not all when it comes to the BNP-Jamaat armoury. It has huge stockpiles of other lethal weapons -- black money, well armed and trained party cadres, and compliant bureaucrats, who are in the parties' thrall. It is a real Byzantine arrangement.

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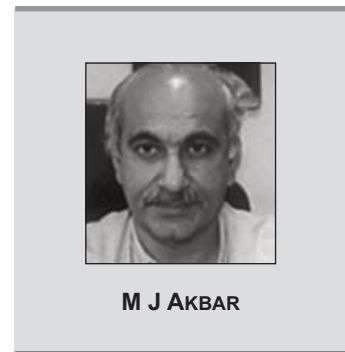


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Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

Who will pay the bill?



M J AKBAR

NEVER underestimate the ability of a lame duck

Senate to cripple any idea that appears in its path. However, the latest episode in the long-running effort to structure a nuclear deal between India and the United States is a bit of a non-event. The US Senate approved a bill that included all the clauses that India, speaking formally through its Parliament, had objected to, and added amendments that will raise more than an eyebrow in Delhi. I cannot see, for instance, India reading from the same page as America on Iran's nuclear programme, or, more important, surrendering its independent right to test again. The rising star of the Democrats, Senator Obama, has lent his name to an amendment that prevents India from storing fuel for its imported reactors. Too much conciliation might be required in the next stage, when the bill will be "reconciled" between the Senate and House versions. Common sense suggests that reconciliation seeks to bridge the difference between what has been passed, rather than eliminate clauses

BYLINE

I recall asking an American friend only one question: How much political capital does George Bush have left in reserve after Iraq, and how much of it is he willing to spend on a nuclear deal with India? More than a year later, reserves of capital have depleted further, and we will know the full answer to that two-part question soon enough.

wholesale. Come December, we shall see what we shall see. In the meantime, let us celebrate the return of calm and maturity to the foreign office in Delhi.

When the House of Representatives passed its version of the bill, a mild form of hysteria broke out, guided by mandarins in external affairs and contract-employees in the Prime Minister's Office. Selected journalists were briefed to lead a media chorus. You might have thought that India had been elected member of the Security Council, and defeated Pakistan in both war and cricket on the same day. This time, the temper of the reaction is both realistic and reassuring. You can see the calm hand of foreign minister Pranab Mukherjee and foreign secretary Shiv Shankar Menon at work. The new message is clear and welcome: India wants a nuclear deal, but it is not going to be written with only an American pen.

Since there is a pause in the affairs of men, it might be appropriate to take a larger look. The basis of the nuclear deal is the agreement signed between President George Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on July 18, 2005. Since then, there have been

three important developments, at least two of which are certainly inter-related, and the third very possibly so. The consequence of these events is that the nuclear map of the world has changed one more time.

From July this year, there has been a growing feeling, now reaching certainty, that the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq has been a failure; that victory in Iraq is impossible, and the best scenario possible is an orderly, phased withdrawal in which power is transferred to a government in Baghdad that is not overtly hostile to the West. Such a transition is impossible without the cooperation of Iraq's neighbours. There have been subtle, and not so subtle, shifts in the dynamic of America's relations with most of the neighbours.

When George Bush was still in charge of events, he declared that three nations constituted an "axis of evil": Iran, Syria and North Korea. Now that events are in charge of Bush, the meaning of "evil" is being renegotiated. Bush accepts that Syria cannot be treated as an outpost, and while he will not yet extend that same consideration to Iran, any realist knows that a settlement in Iraq, if

there is ever going to be one, is impossible without Iran's cooperation. Iran has very sensible diplomats. They know that it makes no sense to tease a defeated elephant, but they also understand that it is a weakened animal. If the American mission in Iraq had gone according to Donald Rumsfeld's dreams, Iran would have been vulnerable today. Now that the war has gone as per Iran's expectations, America is vulnerable.

The first country to exploit this vulnerability was the third member of the axis of evil, North Korea. It is highly unlikely that North Korea would have dared to test three years ago, when the perception of American power was still in the "shock and awe" dimension. It is also moot whether North Korea's principal, and sole, benefactor, would have permitted North Korea to do so. America's muted response has justified the Pyongyang-Beijing calculation. The irony is multiple. America went to Iraq ostensibly to hold the nuclear line, and is emerging from the war with the nuclear line in tatters. A door that was pushed ajar by India and Pakistan in 1998 has been thrown open by North Korea and China eight years later. This eases the pressure on Iran

significantly, since it would be a very brave, if not foolhardy, American President who would now plan an invasion of Iran.

China has been swift to exploit emerging opportunity. It is strengthening Pakistan's capability dramatically, and has just signed up to provide Egypt with a credible nuclear programme. I presume no one with even marginal IQ indulges in the fiction that nuclear reactors are really meant for peaceful purposes. If Egypt needed them for peaceful purposes it would have invested in them at least a generation ago. Egypt knows that with Israel a nuclear power, and Iran on the verge of becoming one, it cannot be a regional player without similar capability. The Saudis certainly have the finances to become a nuclear power and Latin America is not going to remain obediently docile. Japan is nuclear in all but name. It will not deviate from its official, pacific line, but if its self-interest requires a degree of deception, so be it.

The next decade is going to be one of great flux in the nuclear game. This game will be played with the kind of dexterity, determination and patience that India showed during those long decades when we pretended that our nuclear programme was for peaceful purposes only. It is going to be a decade for building parallel alliances. It is not the moment in history when India should willingly tie itself down to any apron string, even if that apron has the enticing brand value of America. It is no accident that one of the conditions

that American legislators want to impose upon India is that it must become part of American policy vis-à-vis Iran.

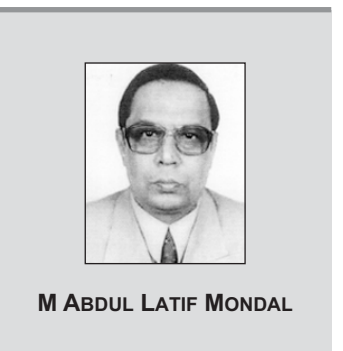
China is free of any such encumbrance, and is playing the nuclear field with careful abandon. It is supplying nuclear fuel and technology to its friends, a point that is registering sharply with mature nations who now see such friendship as critical to their security concerns. Such nations will express their gratitude by encouraging the import of Chinese manufactures, giving China a double whammy. China's eggs are being spread across the world, to fertilise and hatch at whatever pace the local climate will permit. India can see only one basket.

There is still time for contours to shift. And while there are still too many knee-jerk cheerleaders in the chorus surrounding government, the drums are thankfully silent inside government. Prime Minister Singh has made certain commitments to Parliament; it is now up to Washington to ensure that those commitments are honoured.

When the deal was at an incipient stage last year, I recall asking an American friend only one question: How much political capital does George Bush have left in reserve after Iraq, and how much of it is he willing to spend on a nuclear deal with India? More than a year later, reserves of capital have depleted further, and we will know the full answer to that two-part question soon enough.

M J Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

Cautious optimism



M ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

IN my article titled "BNP's 10-point demands: An overview" published in The Daily Star on November 11, I opined that there was nothing wrong with the advisers to the caretaker government (CTG) meeting the leaders of the major political parties and discussing with them the ways and means to overcome the present political impasse and to hold the forthcoming general election peacefully and fairly.

I made this observation in response to BNP's demand for removal of the two advisers CM Shafi Sami and Sultana Kamal on the plea that these two advisers met the Awami League (AL) president Sheikh Hasina on November 2, without the consent of the chief

BARE FACTS

While the political parties/alliances should cooperate with the CTG, the president/CA Iajuddin Ahmed and his advisers must prove their neutrality and impartiality in discharging their functions. The CTG must act quickly to create a level playing field for all the political parties and political alliances to contest the ensuing parliamentary election. The CEC must see the writing on the wall and place the national interest above his personal interest. He can be a part of history by expressing his unwillingness to continue as CEC.

adviser (CA), to convey the message that the government had initiated steps to reconstitute Election Commission (EC).

BNP's claim proved to be incorrect when a clarification was made that the two advisers met the AL chief following a consensus decision of the council of advisers. It may be worthwhile to mention here that following this meeting the AL-led coalition extended the November 3 deadline by a week to enforce indefinite blockade programs across the country.

It is heartening to see that a four-member advisory committee has been formed to discuss with the major political parties and

political alliances having representation in the immediate past parliament to resolve the on-going political crisis. The committee, headed by advisor Dr Akbar Ali Khan and consisting of three other advisors CM Shafi Sami, Mahbubul Alam, and Yasmeen Murshed, has already completed talks with the AL-led 14-party coalition, the BNP-led 4-party alliance, Jatiya Party (Ershad), Jatiya Party (Manju), Jukto Front, and Jatiya Oikya Front comprising of Liberal Democratic Party, Jatiya Oikya Mancha, and Bangladesh Tarikat Federation.

The four advisers have not found their tasks easy as they

noticed lots of differences among the political parties and political alliances participating in the dialogue on the issues that led to the on-going political impasse.

Wrapping up a three-day dialogue between the major political parties and the CTG, the four advisers, who on behalf of the council of advisers opened the talks, met the president and CA Iajuddin Ahmed at Bangabhaban on November 15 and apprised him of the outcome of the talks. The directions will have to come from him. However, the advisory committee has reportedly continued negotiation with the major political parties "behind the scenes" to

arrive at a consensus. The advisory committee will submit an in-depth report on the dialogue in writing at the meeting of the council of advisers.

It appears that the constraints noticed by the advisory committee during the talks with the major political parties and alliances for reaching a consensus to resolve the on-going political impasse are primarily as follows:

First, the AL-led coalition has submitted an 11-point charter of demands which include, among others, reconstitution of the EC through removal of the chief election commissioner, the three election commissioners, and the EC secretary, neutralisation of civil and police administration, updating voter list, withdrawal of "all false cases filed after October 4" and cancellation of decisions on development activities. However, the media reports suggest that if the CTG agrees to reconstitute the EC through removal of CEC and the three other election commissioners, the AL-led coalition may relax the other demands to a large extent. But the BNP-led alliance not only opposes reconstitution of

the EC, but it has also got strong reservations about all other demands of the AL-led coalition.

Second, all major political parties -- except BNP and its allies -- participating in the talks with the advisory committee have strongly recommended reconstitution of the EC for holding the forthcoming general election freely and fairly. As a result, the CTG is finding it difficult to work out a formula to reconstitute the EC, which would be acceptable to the political parties, particularly to the contending two major parties, AL and BNP.

Third, although CEC told news-men on November 2 that if the advisers to the CTG requested him to step down from his office, he would consider their request, with the backing from the BNP and its allies, he has now changed his mindset and remains rigid on his stance not to resign in any situation. Tendering resignation by CEC will help reconstitute the EC as the other three election commissioners are reported to have expressed their unwillingness to continue in their posts. The four advisers who have held dialogue with leaders of the major political

parties and political alliances are reported to have told that they all feel that CEC is the main obstacle to the holding of a universally accepted election.

Fourth, the CEC holds constitutional post. The members of the advisory committee are aware that removal of CEC from his office by the president through formulation of Supreme Judicial Council is a lengthy process and the outcome is also uncertain. They also feel that the option of sending CEC on forced leave may set a bad precedent.

Fifth, exercising the option for appointment of two or more election commissioners keeping CEC in his position will not help solve the on-going political crisis. Such a large EC will not only be unprecedented, but it is most likely to create stalemate in the functioning of the EC itself.

Last but not the least, time is running out fast. The forthcoming general election is to be held within the deadline of January 25, 2007, and this necessitates declaration of election schedule between November 20 and 30. So, it would not be possible for the CTG to do anything to resolve the

political crisis once the election schedule is announced.

To conclude, the political parties and alliances, in particular the BNP-led alliance and the AL-led coalition must make concessions and place national interest above their petty party/alliance interests. They must remember that the people will not forgive them if the democratic process in the country is stalled due to their uncompromising attitude.

While the political parties/alliances should cooperate with the CTG, the president/CA Iajuddin Ahmed and his advisers must prove their neutrality and impartiality in discharging their functions. The CTG must act quickly to create a level playing field for all the political parties and political alliances to contest the ensuing parliamentary election. The CEC must see the writing on the wall and place the national interest above his personal interest. He can be a part of history by expressing his unwillingness to continue as CEC.

M Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary to the Government.