

President's speech

Core issues overlooked

President Iajuddin's much awaited speech came as a disappointment to the nation, now caught in a whirlpool of vicious politics. He asked the agitating 14-party alliance to withdraw their political programmes – and quite rightly at that – citing the colossal loss suffered by the country due to the blockade. But the alliance may legitimately ask what it is getting in return – a question the President didn't attach any importance to. He only exhorted the alliance leaders to take part in the elections.

The need was to address the points raised by the 14-party alliance, but the President's speech was wrapped in an inexplicable opaqueness that could not bring relief to the people. They expected a roadmap that would be the basis for bringing back political stability and paving the way for a free and fair election.

To begin with, the speech lacked the all-important clarity that would help dispel any doubts about the purpose of the caretaker government. He appeared to echo former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's view that the caretaker government's sole purpose is to assist the Election Commission and do nothing else. Finally, the speech failed to provide a sense of direction to the nation for the future.

We appreciate the fact that the President has taken the initiative to reconstitute the EC, but everything will depend on replacing the flawed voter list with an accurate one. The caretaker government has to convince the AL-led opposition that it is trying sincerely to hold an election acceptable to all. And if it succeeds in doing so, it will be in a position to put pressure on the AL and its allies to go all out for the coming elections.

As we all know, the crisis here originates from mistrust and misgivings between the two major parties. And only by ensuring absolute neutrality of his administration, can the President/Chief Adviser to the caretaker government resolve it.

Ctg Port to resume limited operations

Blockade must go for economic sustenance

ACCORDING to sources the 14 Party Alliance has agreed to allow movement of goods laden trucks from the port premises into the city, although the blockade will continue to the extent of the highways connecting the port city with the rest of the country. The limited relaxation of the blockade is reportedly for a period of three days only. On the other hand the port operations were already limping from as early as 12 October due to dock-workers' opposition to leasing out of its sophisticated gantry crane operations to a private company.

Currently as many as 70 ships are waiting at the jetty and outer anchorage for loading and unloading. To add to all this around 18000 containers are stockpiled in the container yard.

Needless to say, the blockade has already caused enough harm to the country's economy. Our exports and imports are badly hit. The most important segment of our economy namely the RMG sector is worst hit, the consequences of which may prove to be disastrous for the country and its economy as a whole, particularly its forex reserves.

We are deeply concerned and strongly feel that the Chittagong port should go into full operation and not be marred by any form of blockade.

No one can endorse any form of political programme that has the potential of disrupting or hindering the process and progress of the country's economy. We therefore urge all concerned to come forward and help create the conditions and an atmosphere so that the Chittagong port can go into full and uninterrupted operation from here onwards. Given the current state of affairs of the country none other than the political parties have to take the lead in this regard. At the same time the administration too has to use all its resources and wisdom to the fullest extent and make the port fully operational without any further loss of time. It may be emphasized once again that whatever may be at stake for the politicians, finding alternative means of protests lay squarely on their shoulders. State's economy cannot be held hostage under any circumstances.

Nepal peace accord raises new hope



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

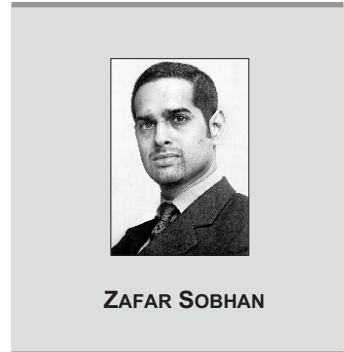
FINALLY, the multi-party democratic government and the radical leftist "Maoists" have signed a landmark peace accord that has raised hopes for permanent peace in the land-locked Himalayan country of Nepal, which experienced the twin problems of struggle for restoration of democracy and leftist insurgency in the recent past.

Democracy had been restored early this year, following a bloody and intense agitation that saw the capitulation of King Gyanendra to the people's demands. Now, another glorious chapter has been added to the picturesque history of the government and the Maoists have vowed to make every effort to turn their country into a land of peace and harmony, ending violence and instability in the

poverty-ridden nation. Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala and radical leftist leader Pushpa Kumar Dayal, better known as Prachanda, signed the peace accord amidst great hopes that Nepal would now march towards the road of progress and stability, bringing an end to the long spell of violence and uncertainty. Indeed, the peace deal was a historic moment for the South Asian country which was virtually crippled by political problems on one hand and the Maoist insurgency on the other. Happily, both are now over, and our fellow brethren in the neighbouring country have now ample reasons to heave a sigh of relief.

The accord came belying scepticism in certain quarters that the two sides would eventually be able to ink the deal, despite enough progress having

Death of a thousand cuts



ZAFAR SOBHAN

SO, the redoubtable MA Aziz is gone. Finally. Or so we are told. Since he has only gone on a 90-day leave, the door remains open for his return. There is no word yet on whether the other highly controversial election commissioner, Mohammad Zakaria, will also step aside. And there is no word on the fate of the other two election commissioners, either.

In fact, one of the two, Justice Mahfuzur Rahman, has been tapped as the acting head of the Election Commission. Recall that Justice Rahman was initially brought in as one of the two election commissioners (Zakaria was the other) hand-picked by the four-party alliance government to give Justice Aziz a majority in the commission, after he repeatedly clashed with the election commissioners, MM Munsef Ali and AK Mohammad Ali, over his refusal to follow court orders and propensity to summarily over-rule them, although the constitution permits the CEC no such power.

The farce continues. The AL-led 14-party alliance may have got a moral victory with the removal of

Aziz, but at what cost? The alliance might even have seen Justice Hasan's decision to decline the chief advisership as a moral victory as well, but in practical terms it is hard to see how he would have been any worse than Iajuddin.

Perhaps the 14-party alliance needs to stop thinking in terms of their moral or psychological victories and start to think in terms of real victories on the ground. In real terms, ending up with Iajuddin as chief adviser was no victory, and in real terms, removal of Aziz is no victory, either.

Even reconstitution of the entire commission would only be a partial victory. Much depends on who would replace the current commissioners and much depends on what steps the replacement commissioners would take.

We are now running dangerously short of time for fixing the bogus voter roll (for which excrescence Aziz should have been removed by a Supreme Judicial Council long ago), and the issues

of the independent financing of the EC and the partisanship of the returning officers still remain unresolved.

Meanwhile, five of the advisers, rather pointedly, called in sick yesterday, in apparent protest at the continued machinations of the president/chief adviser. The dysfunction which we have been used to seeing in the parliament now seems, as perhaps was inevitable, to have infected the caretaker government as well.

The blame for this sorry state of affairs lies solely with the chief adviser, who has been taking unilateral decisions and summarily over-ruling the rest of the advisory council (when he deigns to even take them into confidence as to his orders) even though the constitution states that the council must act as a unified body. But what would he care? The president/chief adviser by-passed the constitution to install himself in the first place, so one would hardly imagine that he would be overly concerned with constitutional niceties at this stage.

STRAIGHT TALK

Surely the lion's share of the blame for this should lie on those who have tried to thwart the possibility of good elections at every step of the way. But my sense is that the waters have been so successfully muddied that a good number of voters are just turned off by the whole process and are tuning everything out. People are getting sick of politics as usual, and that could signal danger for the country. Who knows? Maybe that's the whole idea.

Where will it all end? The 14-party alliance has got one of its demands but it has not realized all of them. The 4-party alliance has lately taken to the streets and one can be assured that if things continue to go against them, that it will continue in this vein.

Four-party alliance cadres also continue to impose a reign of terror on the leaders and supporters of the break-away LDP, the latest atrocity leading to the death of two LDP activists (incidentally ex-BNP men) run over by a fleeing jeep after an LDP procession in Chittagong had been attacked by BNP cadres.

It has been suggested by some that the 14-party alliance needs to move in the direction of elections, even in the absence of meaningful electoral reform. The argument is that if the 14-party alliance contests elections, even deeply flawed elections, then one of two things will happen. One, it might even win, despite engineering. Two, it could only be defeated pursuant to blatant and naked election engineering that would

fuel a movement that would quickly topple any government elected in such an illegitimate fashion.

I am not so sure. It is true that it is easier to mobilize a movement following a stolen election rather than to lead a movement to ensure that elections are not stolen. And it is true that elections do motivate and encourage party workers who will then be in a good position to lead an anti-government movement. But there are down-sides to this strategy as well.

One, if the 14-party alliance agrees to elections, there will be no shortage of people saying that having agreed to stand for elections, they cannot then complain about the outcome. Running in the election will be seen by many as tacit acceptance of the legitimacy of the process, and will leave the AL open to the charge that it always cries foul when it loses an election.

If elections were held and won by the 4-party alliance, we could expect to see the PM and parliament sworn in in double-quick time, and once in place, the newly-elected government will claim constitutional legitimacy and exercise all its authority to maintain its hold on power.

If the 4-party alliance can make even an arguable claim to have followed (on paper at least) all relevant constitutional provisions and broken no laws, then unseating it via agitation will be extremely difficult. Remember that at that point in time all institutions of government such as the civil

service and the police administration would revert to 4-party control.

It is thus doubtful that the 14-party alliance would gain much from sitting for bogus elections. But the question is: what happens if the reforms necessary for free and fair elections are not instituted. Where does the country go then?

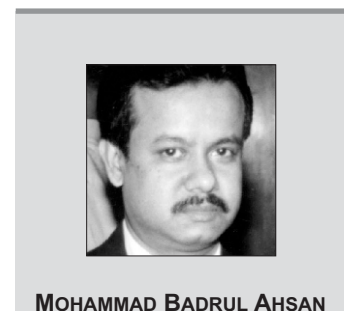
I am afraid that, as far as I see it, the current situation is a zero-sum game. If one side wins, the other loses. As such, I don't think that either side is going to go quietly. We have seen what the AL can do if it is unhappy. There is no reason to believe that the BNP would not be able to do the same thing if the roles were reversed.

So where does that leave us? I am tempted to say: back to square one. In the meantime, the people are dying a death of a thousand cuts as every day brings more political machinations and economic hardship, with the prospect of free and fair elections looking ever more distant.

Surely the lion's share of the blame for this should lie on those who have tried to thwart the possibility of good elections at every step of the way. But my sense is that the waters have been so successfully muddied that a good number of voters are just turned off by the whole process and are tuning everything out. People are getting sick of politics as usual, and that could signal danger for the country. Who knows? Maybe that's the whole idea.

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Looking for the Harvest Moon



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

HERE is a time to sow and there is a time to reap. It goes for politics as it goes for anything else. If things have come to a head, it is because we asked for it. We sowed what we sowed. Now we reap what we reap. If you call it a political deadlock, I wish to call it wedlock. The end is coming to a union with means. In this harvesting time, we are reaping what we have sowed.

But that is not what worries me. Mistakes are made, and lessons are learned so long as the same mistakes are not repeated again. This current impasse will pass. After the CEC goes, the next phase of confrontation will start over his replacement. If worst comes to worst, one political alliance will retreat in the showdown after some bloodshed, or the president will promulgate his rule until the political parties come to their senses. Let us say, we will

CROSS TALK

The practical side of the Harvest Moon is that there is very little darkness between sunset and moonrise, which allows farmers to bring their crops from the fields. In case our political discontent gets prolonged, let us look for the Harvest Moon and find hope in its uninterrupted lights. Once for all, we should learn that to sow is to reap, and there is no escape from this fact of life.

find a solution to everything and push to the election.

Then what? If there is an election at last, will all sides participate in it? If all sides participate, will the losing side concede the election to the winning side? If the conceding happens, will the losing side go to the parliament? Even if they go to the parliament, what happens in the next election? Will there be a caretaker government? Who will form that government? Are we going to repeat the current deadlock all over again?

So, the concern is not only how to break the existing deadlock, but also how to prevent its recurrence. There have been too many quick fixes in the past, too many damage controls. The concept of the caretaker government was reduced to absurdum, a conclusion that contradicted its fundamental premise. And that contradiction has been exposed this time. It is ridiculous to implement a trust-

based alternative in a trustless society like a police sketch artist drawing portrait of a criminal based on the description of two blind witnesses.

Who will go to the root of it? Who can restore trust amongst the contentious politicians so that the next time around they will rest assured that the elections will be fair no matter who holds them? Perhaps the only way to do it is to make politics difficult so that it becomes easy for the genuine politicians. Money and muscle must go, and laws must be passed to bring a few changes. If an elected member doesn't go to the parliament even for one day, he should be able to explain his absence like the rest of us. If he wants to serve the country, he must take it as a full-time job.

All political parties must be registered henceforth, and it must be treated like a license. Any party boycotting the parliament, its

license will be revoked. The parties will have to hold in-house elections every five years to choose a leader if they want to stay in business. The restriction on floor crossing must be lifted to allow bipartisanship to grow in the parliament. Party interest will not be tolerated if it threatens to subvert national interest.

We need an independent judiciary, election commission, and anti-corruption bureau. No political appointments in police, military, and academic institutions. There will be strict enforcement of law against bribery, corruption, perjury, and malpractice. Public servants should be barred from politics while they are on government payroll, and fat cat bureaucrats will not join politics until three years after retirement.

We will need to pass more new laws. Any professional, especially legal practitioners, distorting truth for political gains will go to jail.

Politicians who lie to the people will be tried for treason. The same person can't be elected to the head of government's office for more than one term, a restriction which can be relaxed to two terms once the political system will get reasonably matured. Alternatively, we can impose more stringent age limit on the candidates.

Yes, I have digressed from where I started. I was talking in the harvester sense, reconciling reaping with sowing. What we have sowed is inordinate filth, the absolute frauds, fakes, liars, mean spirited, conniving, scheming, double dealing, double talking, low lives, which have choked our politics like accumulation of cholesterol plaque blocks the arteries. Politics is when the heart of a patriot pumps his passion into the bloodstream. A patriot is when the love of country dances in his blood, his heart pumping to the rhythm of its drumbeats.

One way to explain our problem is that the moral highroad from heart to politics has taken an elusive turn, and instead of the heart entering in politics, politics has entered the heart. It may sound like a play of words, but it makes lot of difference when you come to think. The heart is the repository of pride, love, emotions, and sentiments whereas politics is where people thrash out their

conflicting emotions.

That being that, the question is who is going to bell the cat? It takes political will to harness the political weal and that power lies with the politicians. But if there is fat in the fire, who can tell how long that fire is going to burn? From election to election, demonstration to demonstration, violence to violence, how long is our politics going to keep going postal?

It is said that elderly Chinese women evidently wait to die until after the Harvest Moon Festival and there is a death dip in the week preceding the celebration and a rise in the week afterward. The moral of the story is that hope has the power to overcome anything, even postpone death. For thirty five years we have been postponing hope, while the harvesting season returned to us again and again.

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Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

MATTERS AROUND US

It is heartening to note that the two sides have reached understanding on such sensitive issues like the status of the arms with the rebels, who agreed to share power. The development is expected to facilitate lasting peace in Nepal whose people -- most of whom are mired in abject poverty -- are now upbeat about the future of their country. The government and the rebels must not disappoint them any more, and both sides deserve kudos for the great job they have done for their country and people.

been made earlier towards this direction. Certain sensitive issues appeared to have hindered the process of signing of the deal, but the government and the rebels lived up to the expectations of their countrymen, and the well-wishers outside.

Hundreds of politicians, diplomats and journalists, along with millions others, burst into cheers when Prime Minister Koirala and insurgent leader Prachanda signed the accord in Kathmandu on Tuesday. Definitely, it is a red-letter day for the country whose people have gone through tremendous hardship and miseries in recent years, because of the twin problems.

governing the pattern of rule for the nation, and the mechanism for the coming national elections. But they admirably demonstrated remarkable unity in the anti-king pro-democracy agitation, despite their differences on some matters, and have now signed peace plans. The king had surrendered to the pro-democracy mass agitation earlier, but the sensitive relationship between the government and the Maoists remained a matter of concern for many. Much of this anxiety is now over. The Maoists, under the deal, will join the present interim government and involve themselves in mainstream politics. The two sides have signed a power-sharing pact under which the Maoists will place their weapons under UN supervision. This is a big leap forward towards political stability and lasting harmony

in the country that has been so badly afflicted with colossal damage to socio-economic areas.

Now the two sides will work for a new constitution. Elections for a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution for the country will be held by April next year, and this decision met another demand of the ultra-leftists who want abolition of monarchy in the country. The present parliament, which was scrapped by King Gyanendra in February, 2005, was restored following a people's movement spearheaded by the political parties and the Maoists. This settled the political problems with the king, and the country is back to democratic rule. But the lingering crisis involving the radicals somehow persists, although no fighting is going on under the changed circumstances.

Things moved well, with Prime Minister GP Koirala and Maoist supreme Prachanda achieving unexpectedly good progress in their talks before deciding on the shape of things relating to the system of governance. Nepal saw broad-based unity of the two sides in ending not only the absolute rule of the king, but also in clipping his powers drastically. The future of

the monarchy remains a point of difference between the government and the rebels, as the former favours a ceremonial throne devoid of any power, while the latter is opposed to it, tooth-and-nail, in any form.

Notwithstanding the narrowing down of differences on a variety of issues, two crucially important subjects, the fate of the arms now in possession of the rebels and the future of the monarchy, were defying total understanding between two sides. Obviously, the government wants to continue with the Westminster system of democracy while the Maoists, in principle, believe in the one-party communist system, which, however, is not a bone of contention at the moment.

But the ultimate shape of the monarchy is certainly at the heart of the differences. The prime minister and some parties in the present seven-party alliance coalition favour continuation of monarchy without any executive power, but the ultras are against it and want to turn the country into a republic.

They even want trial of King Gyanendra for, according to them, amassing wealth in the poverty-ridden country, and for the atrocities committed during the pro-democracy movement.

The government has stripped the king of key powers, including control over the armed forces, and automatic accession to the throne on family lines, but favours the continuation of the throne in line with Britain, Japan, or Thailand.

But the Nepalese throne has been badly bruised by the present king by his exercise of absolute power, and by the atrocities to crush the movement seeking democracy. The people of the country seem to be divided on the fate of the monarchy, while an effective monarchy is simply out of question.

However, the most sensitive issue that appeared to defy an understanding was the status of the arms that are in possession of the Maoist cadres. The government wants them to disarm, but Prachanda is not ready to give up the arms so easily. After all, they were able to develop a more than 30,000-strong force in ten years, and are, therefore, unwilling to deposit the arms with the government.

The issue assumes significance and complexity as the elections are drawing nearer. But now the two sides have reached an understanding. The accord also covers a human rights agreement, and the modalities and details of arms

monitoring. The UN has asked the government and the Maoists to start focusing on human rights issues. Political parties and some human rights organizations have accused the radicals of extortion, kidnapping and intimidation, despite the truce. The rebels say that they now accept only voluntary contributions.

Nepal's problems may not be over if the government and the Maoists return to differences on such issues like the 240 year old monarchy, and the nitty-gritty of their peace deal. But the accord has made the chances of that happening very slim, although they cannot be totally ruled out.

It is heartening to note that the two sides have reached understanding on such sensitive issues like the status of the arms with the rebels, who agreed to share power. The development is expected to facilitate lasting peace in Nepal whose people -- most of whom are mired in abject poverty -- are now upbeat about the future of their country. The government and the rebels must not disappoint them any more, and both sides deserve kudos for the great job they have done for their country and people.

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