

Another controversy

The election schedule could have waited a few more days

WHY is it that everything we do has to end up in some controversy? What should otherwise have been a routine affair has turned into a surreptitious one by both the suddenness and the manner in which it was done.

A few simple facts will tell a big story. In 1996, the election was held on June 12 and the election schedule was announced on April 27, 46 days before the polls. In 2001, election was held on October 1 and the schedule was announced on August 19, a mere 43 days before. In our present case the poll date has been fixed for January 21 and the schedule announced yesterday, a good 55 days in advance. The question is why? If we follow what Justice Latifur Rahman did in the last election we could have waited a good 11 more days, not to speak of the earlier election in 1996 which gives us 13 days.

The fact that we did not follow the earlier examples clearly indicates that the election commission was in a hurry, the reason for which remains a mystery for us, especially when the 14 party alliance and several other political parties were demanding some more time for this announcement.

According to the 90 days limit all election activities will have to be completed by January 25, 2007. With election date being set for January 21, 2007, it leaves only four days for all re-polling activities. This is another proof that the schedule was announced in a hurry.

Then again why was the schedule announced before the printing of the voter list was complete? In all previous elections printing of voter list was complete before the election schedule was announced. On the contrary, in the present case there is widespread confusion with some saying it will be ready within a week and yet others saying that it will take several weeks. Another example of the hurried nature of the announcement.

In previous election, the schedule was announced through an address of the CEC over television or through a press conference, while yesterday media was totally kept out of the scene and the announcement came through a gazette notification in the morning. Only in the afternoon was the press given the information by the secretary of the EC.

Once again the advisors to the caretaker government were kept out of the picture. Even during the morning meeting when the gazette was already out the President did not inform his council of advisors. The discussion took place only after the advisors themselves raised it quoting the media. Whereas the EC secretary told the media in the afternoon that every aspect of the decision was discussed with the President/CA who approved it the night before.

The above facts leave no doubt in our mind that instead of moving towards a more transparent election process, it is deliberately being more opaque and as such subject to more questions and doubts.

Price hike of essentials

Consumers in great trouble

THE leaders of the Consumers Association of Bangladesh have urged the caretaker government to sit with the political parties with a view to arresting the price hike. The point made by them hardly needs any elaboration, as people are finding it increasingly difficult to remain afloat in the face of all kinds of odds the price hike being one of their major concerns. The caretaker government is dealing with a host of highly complex issues revolving primarily around the holding of next general elections.

However, price hike is something that has a great bearing on the lives of people and, as such, the government has to address it with a sense of urgency. It has to seek cooperation of the major political parties, which are now fighting it out in the middle. The political parties have to be sympathetic to the people that they are supposed to serve. They can ill afford to ignore the truth that the tactic of putting pressure on the government or the political rivals cannot be stretched beyond the point where people become its direct victims. In this case, the issue of price hike has taken a backseat amid the raucous politics.

The dishonest elements among the traders and businessmen are taking full advantage of the political uncertainty and dislocation. The political parties should try to counter them, instead of creating the opportunities for market manipulation.

Zionism: Pitting the West against Islam

Zionism owes its success solely to this unlikely partnership. On their own, the Zionists could not have gone anywhere. They could not have created Israel by bribing or coercing the Ottomans into granting them a charter to colonize Palestine. Despite his offers of loans, investments, technology and diplomatic expertise, Theodore Herzl was repeatedly rebuffed by the Ottoman Sultan. It is even less likely that the Zionists could, at any time, have mobilized a Jewish army in Europe to invade and occupy Palestine, against the Ottoman and Arab opposition to the creation of a Jewish state on Islamic lands. The Zionist partnership with the West was indispensable for the creation of a Jewish state.

M SHAHID ALAM

It is tempting to celebrate the creation of Israel as a great triumph, perhaps the greatest in Jewish history. Indeed, the history of Israel has often been read as the heroic saga of a people, marked for extinction, who emerged from Nazi death camps -- from Auschwitz, Belzec, and Treblinka -- to establish their own state in 1948, a Jewish haven and a democracy that has prospered even as it has defended itself valiantly against unceasing Arab threats and aggression.

Without taking away anything from the sufferings of European

Jews, I will insist that this way of thinking about Israel -- apart from its mythologizing -- has merit only as a partisan narrative. It seeks to insulate Israel against the charge of a devastating colonization by falsifying history, by camouflaging the imperialist dynamics that brought it into existence, and by denying the perilous future which now confronts the Jews, the West, and the Islamic world.

When we examine the consequences that have flowed from the creation of Israel, when we contemplate the greater horrors that may yet flow from the logic of Zionism, Israeli triumphs appear in a different light. We are forced to examine these triumphs with

growing dread and incredulity. Israel's early triumphs, though real from a narrow Zionist standpoint, have slowly mutated by a fateful process into ever-widening circles of conflict that now threaten to escalate into major wars between the West and Islam.

Although this conflict has its source in colonial ambitions, the dialectics have slowly endowed it with the force and rhetoric of a civilizational war; and perhaps worse, a religious war. This is the tragedy of Israel. It is not a fortuitous tragedy. Driven by history, chance and cunning, the Zionists wedged themselves between two historical adversaries, the West and Islam; and by harnessing the

strength of the first against the second it has produced the conditions of a conflict that has grown deeper over time.

Zionist historiography describes the emergence of Israel as a triumph over Europe's centuries-old anti-Semitism, in particular over its twentieth-century manifestation, the demonic, industrial plan of the Nazis to stamp out the existence of the Jewish people. But this is a tendentious reading of Zionist history: it obscures the historic offer Zionism made to the West -- the offer to lead the West of its Jews, to rid them out of Christendom into Islamic Palestine. In offering to "cleanse" the West of the "hated Jews," the Zionists were working with the anti-Semites, not against them.

Theodore Herzl, the founding father of Zionism, had a clear understanding of this complementarity between Zionism and anti-Semitism; and he was convinced that Zionism would prevail only if anti-Semitic Europe could be persuaded to work for its success. It is true that Jews and anti-Semites have been historical adversaries, that Jews have been the victims of

Europe's religious vendetta since Rome first embraced Christianity. However, Zionism would enter into a new relationship with anti-Semitism that would work to the advantage of Jews.

The insertion of the Zionist idea in Western discourse would work a profound change in the relationship between Western Jews and Gentiles. In order to succeed, the Zionists would have to create a new adversary, common to the West and the Jews. In choosing to locate their colonial-settler state in Palestine -- and not in Uganda or Argentina -- the Zionists had also chosen an adversary that would deepen their partnership with the West. The Islamic world was a great deal more likely to energize the West's imperialist ambitions and evangelical zeal than Africa or Latin America.

Israel was the product of a partnership that seems unlikely at first blush, between Western Jews and the Western world. It is the powerful alchemy of the Zionist idea that created this partnership. The Zionist project to create a Jewish state in Palestine possessed the unique power to convert two historical

antagonists, Jews and Gentiles, into allies united in a common imperialist enterprise against the Islamic world. The Zionists harnessed the negative energies of the Western world -- its imperialism, its anti-Semitism, its crusading nostalgia, its anti-Islamic bigotry, and its deep racism -- and focused them on a new imperialist project, the creation of a Western surrogate state in the Islamic heartland.

To the West's imperialist ambitions, this new colonial project offered a variety of strategic advantages. Israel would be located in the heart of the Islamic world; it would sit astride the junction of Asia, Africa and Europe; it would guard Europe's gateway to the Indian Ocean; and it could monitor developments in the Persian Gulf with its vast reserves of oil. For the West, as well as Europe's Jews, this was a creative moment: indeed, it was a historical opportunity. For European Jews, it was a stroke of brilliance.

Zionism was going to leverage Western power in its cause. As the Zionist plan would unfold, inflicting pain on the Islamic world, evoking Islamic anger against the West and the Jews, the complementarities between the two would deepen. In time,

new complementarities would be discovered -- or created -- between the two antagonist strains of Western history.

In the United States, the Zionist movement would give encouragement to evangelical Protestants -- who looked upon the birth of Israel as the fulfillment of end-time prophecies -- and convert them into fanatic partisans of Zionism. In addition, Western civilization, which had hitherto traced its central ideas and institutions to Rome and Athens, would be repackaged as a Judeo-Christian civilization. This reframing not only underscores the Jewish roots of the Western world, it also makes a point of emphasizing that Islam is the outsider, the adversary.

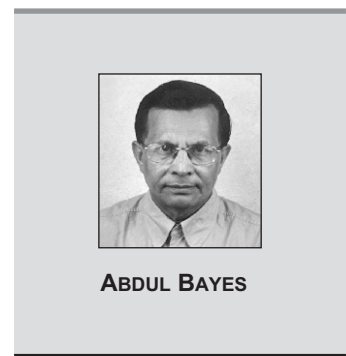
Zionism owes its success solely to this unlikely partnership. On their own, the Zionists could not have gone anywhere. They could not have created Israel by bribing or coercing the Ottomans into granting them a charter to colonize Palestine. Despite his offers of loans, investments, technology and diplomatic expertise, Theodore Herzl was repeatedly rebuffed by the Ottoman Sultan.

It is even less likely that the Zionists could, at any time, have mobilized a Jewish army in Europe to invade and occupy Palestine, against the Ottoman and Arab opposition to the creation of a Jewish state on Islamic lands. The Zionist partnership with the West was indispensable for the creation of a Jewish state. This partnership was also fateful. It produced a powerful new dialectic, which has encouraged Israel, both as the political centre of the Jewish diaspora and the chief outpost of the West in the heart of the Islamic world, to become more daring in its designs against the Islamic world and beyond.

In turn, a wounded and humiliated Islamic world, more resentful and determined after every defeat, has been driven to embrace increasingly radical ideas and methods to recover its dignity and power -- and to attain this recovery on the strength of Islamic ideas. This destabilizing dialectic has now brought the West itself into direct confrontation against the Islamic world. We are now staring into the precipice. Yet do we possess the will to pull back from it?

M Shahid Alam is professor of economics at a university in Boston.

Engraving an engineered election



ABDUL BAYES

BENEATH THE SURFACE

We also noticed that while he was proposing induction of two more commissioners in the EC, and appointment of a neutral person as CEC, Mr Mahfuzur Rahman was declaring himself as the CEC. Should we then assume that what the honourable president told the nation a few hours before was mere lip service, and should be treated with suspicion? We still want to believe that the president will immediately place a neutral person as CEC, no matter whether Mahfuzur Rahman stays in EC or not.

JUSTICE Mahfuzur Rahman, a commissioner of the Election Commission (EC), has apparently orchestrated a legal coup to capture the chair of the chief election commissioner (CEC). All of a sudden, he declared himself as head of the EC. We are still to know whether or not he was blessed by the president in his coup d'etat. This occurred only a few hours after public wrath forced MA Aziz to go on leave, and on the heels of the president's assurance that a neutral person would be placed as CEC.

We believe that Mr Rahman should have had the patience to wait for the two additional commissioners to come, and also for a signal from the government to that effect. That would, probably, have made things more decent and devoid of controversy. The haste with which he essentially "hijacked" the chair suggests some dirty tricks in the offing, leading towards an engineered election.

Something more to be noted in this regard. According to the prevailing perception, Mr Rahman cannot claim that posi-

tion for a few reasons. First, he actively supported the preparation of the fake voter list that came under severe criticism at home and abroad. In fact, the demand for removal of MA Aziz, and a cleaning up of the EC, mainly rested on that argument.

Second, it is alleged that the army recovered arms from his house at Mohammadpur during Operation Clean Heart. TV channels produced footage of that before the public. Particularly, he has been alleged to have sheltered a top terrorist (his brother-in-law) of the then ruling party in his house. Under the normal rules of the country, Mr Rahman should have been sued under criminal law but, as ill luck would have it, his political mentors "rewarded" him for sheltering the terrorist in his house.

Third, he lied to the nation by arguing that the warrant of precedence places him above a secretary of the government. In fact, that argument holds true only in the case of an active justice, not for a retired one.

Fourth, he made some unbecoming remarks about some political parties soon after he

proclaimed himself CEC. And finally, the specter of the outgoing CEC MA Aziz seemed to have already dawned on him when he declared that the next election would be held with the controversial voter list. And unlike the practice in the past, Mr Rahman does not have any intention of seeking suggestions from political parties in declaring the election schedule. It means that he plans to engineer the election in favour of the party that he has been benefited by, and to ignore the arguments of the critics. It thus appears that the first nail, if not the last, in the coffin of a neutral election will come from the EC itself, and the CEC in particular.

Reportedly, a rehearsal of the upcoming engineered election was held the other day in Mr Mahmudur Rahman's office at Uttara. Mr Mahmudur Rahman is a former energy adviser. About 30-40 former and present secretaries attended that meeting with a view to charting the engineered election.

This was disclosed by the electronic and the print media. In fact, the daily Prothom Alo pub-

lished pictures of officials hiding their faces from the cameras. Should the president-cum-chief of CTG assume that those so called servants of the republic will ensure a free and fair election or, should he not initiate an immediate enquiry and take the "culprits" to task?

Meantime, most, if not all, of the spirit of a neutral caretaker government has already evaporated with the emergence of a politically appointed president as the chief of the caretaker government (CTG). Notwithstanding constitutional questions, the CTG is alleged to have shown no sign of neutrality even after the expiry of about one-fourth of the total time period allotted for holding an election. The officially appointed advisers have been disconcertingly pushed to the sidelines while, allegedly, unofficial advisers from various Bhabans play the tunes behind the president.

We were surprised to note that the honourable president of the country took almost 15 days to realize the gravity of the situation relating to the CEC, and then took another four days to act upon the suggestions of his own appointed

advisers. The home secretary is still in the chair, despite the allegation that he made a mess out of an official order for army deployment.

Besides, the president's holding back of important decisions from advisers has been creating a lot of confusion among the concerned circles. And, last but not least, the honourable president has at long last spoken to the nation -- at 11.30 pm -- the time people usually go to sleep. His words were seemingly aimed against the ongoing movement against CEC MA Aziz, but he said nothing about what he has been doing to erase the perception of people about his partisan position.

We also noticed that while he was proposing induction of two more commissioners in the EC, and appointment of a neutral person as CEC, Mr Mahfuzur Rahman was declaring himself as the CEC. Should we then assume that what the honourable president told the nation a few hours before was mere lip service, and should be treated with suspicion? We still want to believe that the president will immediately place a neutral person as CEC, no matter whether Mahfuzur Rahman stays in EC or not.

The individual interest of Mahfuzur Rahman cannot be put above the interest of the country. It is imperative on the part of the president to uphold the truth that his words are his deeds, and that his deeds are geared towards holding a free, fair, and neutral election participated in by all political parties.

Mr President should also

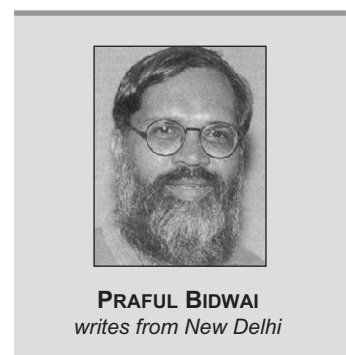
kindly note that even his neutral position could be questioned because of his past alignment to a political party -- a formidable contestant in the upcoming election. The opposition must be satisfied with the condition that besides the president -- political as he is -- all other posts are held by purely non-partisan people. That includes the EC especially.

Under the current arrangement, we earnestly propose that: (a) a new, neutral CEC should be appointed with immediate effect; (b) the voter list should be updated; (c) all political appointees should be removed; and (d) as in the past, election schedules should be declared only after an environment has been created for a free, fair, and neutral election. The nation has already paid heavily because of a person like MA Aziz. Remember that all political parties, barring BNP and Jamat, stand for a true reconstitution of the EC.

None would doubt that with the existing apparatus, the government and the EC could come up with an election. But definitely it is going to be rigged, and be a revision of the unhappy episode of 1996. The professor turned president turned chief of CTG should remember that history has never hailed such engineered elections. Equally, history gives a rare chance to be remembered respectfully by the people. Mr President should be proud of having that chance, and should act accordingly.

Abdul Bayes is Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

Prachanda's greatest moment: Nepal shows the way



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

The mass movement was without precedent in South Asia for its intensity and powerful thrust against arbitrary rule. Although catalysed by the Maoists-SPA, it had an autonomous character. Ordinary Nepalis took charge of it with exemplary maturity. They became arbiters of their fate and won. It's tempting to see this as opportunism. But Maoist ideologue Baburam Bhattarai had formulated a new thesis even earlier: in the 21st century, a Left-wing strategy cannot be based on armed struggle alone. Nepali socialism must have a multi-party system.

government; disarmament of the People's Liberation Army under United Nations supervision; and in the 425-member CA's election.

Even trickier is the issue of a referendum, demanded by one party, on abolishing the monarchy. This may enable the king's backdoor entry into power. All other parties want the issue settled by a new constitution.

Differences also persist on whether Nepal should be a full-fledged republic or a ceremonial monarchy.

Nevertheless, Nepal seems set for great political change -- more fundamental and potentially more durable than in 1990, when parliamentary government was installed. That shift was messy, and eroded by a monarch who could dismiss elected governments.

Even this moth-eaten democratisation was reversed by Gyanendra in February 2005.

The historic changes under way in Nepal were triggered by a popular anti-monarchy movement, which peaked last April. Crucial to it was a 12-point agreement between the Seven-Party

Alliance (SPA) and the Maoists, which pledged to end the "autocratic monarchy" and establish a Constituent Assembly.

The mass movement was without precedent in South Asia for its intensity and powerful thrust against arbitrary rule. Although catalysed by the Maoists-SPA, it had an autonomous character. Ordinary Nepalis took charge of it with exemplary maturity. They became arbiters of their fate and won.

The 12-point agreement wouldn't have happened without the Maoists' insistence on a CA. The Maoists too moderated their stand under the 8-point agreement with the SPA last June, with a "firm commitment" to a "multi-party system ... human rights, the rule of law and democratic ... values..."

It's tempting to see this as opportunism. But Maoist ideologue Baburam Bhattarai had formulated a new thesis even earlier: in the 21st century, a Left-wing strategy cannot be based on armed struggle alone. Nepali socialism must have a multi-party system.

Recently, CPN(M) chairman

Prachanda too said that the "monopolistic and bureaucratic tendencies of Communist parties in power can be checked" only through a multi-party system. He explicitly repudiated Stalinism.

Prachanda seems to be modelling himself after Nelson Mandela. In Delhi last week, he met World Bank officials, but without losing his radical bearings. He promised to "improve on" India's democratic model by giving it substantive content through programs to abolish poverty and "all forms of exploitation."

The Maoists' record in fighting rural oppression, caste-ism and gender discrimination is indeed encouraging. But Prachanda's grand vision must be translated into abjuring violence, getting the Maoist militia (outside the PLA) to surrender arms, and verifiably stopping tax collection and recruitment of schoolchildren into the PLA.

This view sharply differs from the cynical attitude of many hawkish "strategic analysts" who believe the CPN(M) will grab power to establish a dictatorship;

it must be disarmed first.

Such analysts don't understand the forces that shape history. The Maoists must be held down to their commitment to disarm. But they aren't bound by any agreement to do so before joining the government.

Maoism arose in Nepal because of entrenched inequalities, coupled with the Palace's despotism and blatant misgovernance for two centuries. Seventy percent of Nepalis are desperately poor. The top 5 percent own 37 percent of the land, while close to half own just 15 percent.

Nepali society is dominated by the Kathmandu Valley's elite. But in recent years, janajatis (subaltern ethnic groups) and the landless have become assertive.

The Maoists represent them. It's impossible to justify their indiscriminate violence. But they indisputably speak for Nepal's dispossessed. If they join the mainstream, they can make a sterling contribution to Nepal.

The present moment offers a historic chance to integrate them. It'd be disastrous to squander it by citing "threats" to India's "security," as the hawks do.

The CPN(M) knows that posing a threat to India means taking unaffordable risks. Its best bet lies in developing a level, balanced relationship with India. Prachanda has been at pains to distance the Maoists from India's Naxalites.

He recently pooh-poohed the "Pashupati-to Tirupati Red

Corridor" idea. The claim of an operational Naxal-Maoist link been repeatedly disproved.

India's Nepal policy was marked in the past by uncritical support for the monarchy on the premise that it's the best guarantee of stability -- which it patently isn't. India facilitated the 12-point agreement, but soon started vacillating.

Last April, at the peak of the pro-democracy movement, India sent former maharajah Karan Singh, married into the Nepalese royalty, to Kathmandu to signal its support for Gyanendra.

This was one of India's greatest-ever foreign policy blunders. India revised its stand, but lost popular Nepali goodwill at a critical juncture.

New Delhi must resist the temptation to suggest any role for the monarch in a future political arrangement -- and not just because Gyanendra is both vicious and unreliable.

It must respect the wishes of the Nepali people and counter the impression that it wants to interfere in Nepal, in particular tilt the political balance against the Maoists -- like the United States does through its arrogant Vice-regal ambassador James Moriarty.

India's best bet lies in a democratic Nepal, where stability comes not from monarchical symbols, but from participatory governance which is responsive to popular needs.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.