

Army deployment

lajuddin's action makes light of the issue

RESIDENT Iajuddin's decision not to engage the army in operational duty immediately, instead keep them on standby or, as one adviser said, keep the army at 'rest' for the time being, vindicates fully what everybody in the country had known so far and what the entire council of advisers, bar none, had advised against, that the deployment of the army was premature, everybody except the president that is. Thus if we were to question his motives as being less than pious would we be wrong?

And in going against the better counsel of his team, having proclaimed on December 9 as prelude to the deployment, that it was necessitated by the need to protect the lives and properties of the people to keep alive the economic activities to seize illegal weapons and thwart terrorist activities, he has made very light of the military by his decision to 'rest' the army, and made his office look very callow too.

We will be well within our rights to ask of the president to clarify as to what the decision making process he had employed to arrive at such an important course of action only to find nothing for the army to do, having deployed to new locations after being called away from their winter manoeuvre which they undertake once in a year only?

We have noticed in the president and the chief adviser a propensity to reach out for the army without rhyme or reason as we saw him order once before, only to rescind it after finding his colleagues resistant to his plans. Then also he acted in complete secrecy as this time, keeping his colleagues in the dark. This is a glaring example of the president's unilateralist approach, something we have been calling upon him to expurgate from his attitude.

The deployment has not only been premature, it has also resulted in unnecessary wastage in terms of money, material and manpower, let alone the fact that their winter training was disrupted. And assuming that the elections are held as per the announced schedule, it is still five weeks away, a long time indeed for the soldiers to rest, deployed in various parts of the country, in cities and towns.

It would be in the fitness of things if they were to revert to their normal duty of training instead of remaining standby. In fact the state of 'stand by' can be also fulfilled in their respective training or peace locations.

Martyred Intellectuals' Day

Only lip service will not perpetuate their memory

THE Martyred Intellectuals' Day has returned, once again bringing back the grief and the painful memories for those who lost their loved ones. Loss of these invaluable lives is a tragedy not only for the families but an irreparable loss also for the entire nation. The void created may never be filled.

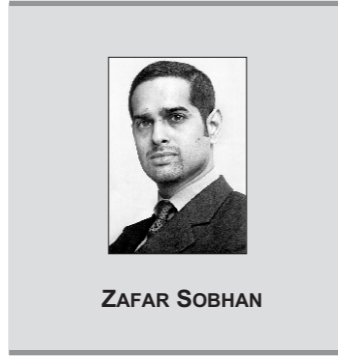
Merely going through the rituals of observing the day every year cannot be the end of it all. Surely we owe much more to these illustrious people. It is indeed our sacred duty, and we owe it to our posterity to uphold the ideals for which they laid down their lives. We have not only failed to do so but also find that many of those perpetrators, planners and collaborators of the occupation forces who masterminded the brutal killings and were actively involved in the brutality, stalk our sacred homeland. Indeed it seems that their plans are being fulfilled.

It also pains us to see as to how the families of the martyred intellectuals are passing their days in total oblivion and seclusion. On this day we are sorry to say that today's intellectuals, many of who were once protégés and students of the martyred intellectuals have done but little to preserve their memories or advance the ideals for which they died. Regrettably, they are quickly fading from our minds.

One may speak volumes about the negligence and apathy of the successive governments over time, and their failures, but surely we, as citizens too, are also to blame for this utterly degrading and shameful situation. We too have failed to duly honour and recognise the contribution of these illustrious and brave men and women who gave their lives so that we could live in an independent homeland of ours.

At a time when the country is passing through one of the most critical times of its existence, let us promise to do more for these valiant Martyrs by underlining their contributions to our society, from which the future generations cannot only enrich themselves but also learn from the examples of indomitable spirit of dedication and sacrifice that these intellectuals had set.

Time to call



ZAFAR SOBHAN

WHO would have thought that we would look back on the 2001 caretaker government as the model of probity and integrity. At the time, the AL complained vociferously about the steps taken by then chief adviser, Justice Latifur Rahman (though, unhappily for them, their arguments gained little traction with the general public).

What a difference five years make. Right about now, I bet that the Latifur Rahman caretaker government is looking pretty good to the AL in comparison to the current one, and even the general public is somewhat taken aback by the crudity and obviousness of Iajuddin's machinations.

Let us recall that nothing Latifur Rahman, who perhaps is feeling a little vindicated (if not down-right smug) these days, did was in contravention of his council of advisers. He held meetings, listened to their opinions, and they acquiesced with



STRAIGHT TALK

But if the opposition wants elections without Iajuddin, it will have to have the courage of its conviction that his position is untenable and that elections under his supervision are unacceptable. It will have to spear-head a people's movement for his ouster. If four advisers have had the courage to resign and thus given their vote of no-confidence in the president/chief adviser, perhaps the time has come. But, either way, it's a risky call.

all his decisions. It was this, more than anything else, that convinced the general public that he was on the level.

But Iajuddin's tenure has been quite different. His insistence on acting unilaterally and summarily over-ruling his advisers is unprecedented. The fact that things reached such a crisis point that four of the advisers went to the extent of resigning from the caretaker government in frustration this week is also quite unprecedented and should indicate that there is something seriously amiss.

It is axiomatic. It shouldn't need to be pointed out that if decisions are taken by the entire council of advisers collectively, that they should be carried out, and that it is unlawful and, to be perfectly blunt, unconstitutional for the president/chief adviser to countermand them. But from the very beginning, this has been the pattern.

This observation brings us to a second rather unhappy feature of Iajuddin's tenure: his observ-

able penchant for time-wasting. The latest reports are that he has made a U-turn and will apparently now consent to send the election commissioners Zakaria and Mudabbir on leave and has put the army on "stand-by."

This is all well and good. But the fact is that with the constitutional clock ticking, it is the height of irresponsibility for him to take decisions one day and roll them back the next. If this was what was going to happen, then the actions should have done taken right away.

Again, the contrast with Latifur Rahman is striking. Latifur Rahman wasted not a moment of the 90 days that he had. There was no incessant putting off of the other advisers. There were no interminable delays. There was no postponement of meetings. He had done his homework and did not issue orders one day and then revoke them the next.

Some are of the opinion that the four advisers should not have resigned. However, it seems to

me that they had no choice. The simple fact of the matter is that the president/chief adviser has been unconstitutionally usurping the authority of the council of advisers, has treated his advisers with contempt and disrespect, and that he is moving full speed ahead towards elections that will not be free and fair. In this situation, as conscientious and self-respecting members of the government, what else could they do?

If it was not possible for them to make their voices heard, and it wasn't, then to stay would have made them complicit in the president's machinations. If they felt that the caretaker government could not preside over free and fair elections, and this is indeed what they felt, then it was their bounden duty to resign.

But the question is: where do we go from here?

Let's get down to brass tacks. In the time left to us, given the composition of the EC and the state of the voter roll and the actions of the president/chief adviser, either it is possible to

hold free and fair elections, or it is not.

Now, we all want elections. But we also need to be realistic. This is not the time to let our optimism or utopianism or innate belief in the goodness of our fellow man blind us to the reality of the situation. We need to be hard-headed and coldly rational in our analysis.

To my mind, the chances of good elections were slim to begin with. We had 90 days to fix the voter list and institute the necessary reforms, all assuming that the will to do all this existed. This process has barely advanced an inch. We now have some 40-odd days left, and it seems to me highly improbable, especially given the evident mind-set of the president/chief adviser.

Given the fact that precious little has been done in terms of the transfer of administrative and police personnel and reconstitution of the EC, and with the president's political inclinations and lack of shame when it comes to pleasing his political masters in the open for all to see, I can understand how the four advisers came to the conclusion that the way forward was a dead-end.

It seems clear to me, and I believe, to most fair-minded observers, that we have come to the point where we cannot trust Iajuddin to preside over credible elections. It remains possible, theoretically, that elections might turn out well, but this would be

despite the president's best efforts, not because of them, and it does not seem to me wise to put one's faith in such a fortuitous eventuality.

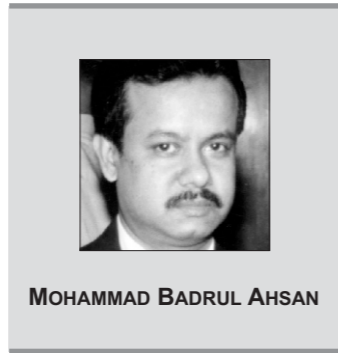
The opposition is caught in a Catch-22 situation. The temptation to contest elections, even questionable elections, is obviously great, and this would save the nation much anxiety and uncertainty. But, at the same time, it must ask itself what would be gained and what would potentially be lost by following this course of action.

But if the opposition wants elections without Iajuddin, it will have to have the courage of its conviction that his position is untenable and that elections under his supervision are unacceptable. It will have to spear-head a people's movement for his ouster. If four advisers have had the courage to resign and thus given their vote of no-confidence in the president/chief adviser, perhaps the time has come. But, either way, it's a risky call.

If this were a poker game, it would be time for both sides to lay their cards on the table and see what the other is holding. The 14-party alliance has called a grand rally in Dhaka on December 18. I guess we'll know soon enough, one way or the other.

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The recoil of politics



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IT seems, at last, that so much investment has paid no dividends. Scores of newspaper articles, television interviews, political meetings, backroom discussions, demonstrations, sieges, dialogues, shape shiftings, negotiations, bloodshed, arson, violence, anxieties and sufferings, have not pulled the country away from disaster but pushed it closer to the brink. We keep fighting over the semblance of democracy, but the substance has been slipping away.

And that reminds of an interesting exchange between the Inquisitor and the Chaplain during the trial of Joan of Arc in George Bernard Shaw's "Saint Joan." The Inquisitor orders the Chaplain to sit down, but the Chaplain refuses to comply. Then the Inquisitor says: "If you will not sit, you must stand." To that the Chaplain says: "I will not stand," and flings himself into his



CROSS TALK

Let me put it in ballistics terms. If pride is the bullet then arrogance is the recoil of the gun. Our politics is not hitting targets because the impact of the recoil is much larger than the force of the bullet. Ban arrogance and take the recoil out of politics. Proper pride will see that the projectile travels far without having much propellant blast.

seat. The irony of conceited minds is that they do not care about right and wrong when it comes to pride.

So what we saw over the last few months is the see-saw action between the two political sides. If one sat down, the other stood up. And the whole thing has been a matter of pride. No, I don't mean it was a proud thing they did, but they have done it out of pride. What happened is loud and clear. The problem drifted away each time the solution looked near.

If we take the caretaker government as the microcosm of the republic, then the Shavian determination looks even more familiar. Ten advisors and their chief, eleven gentlemen of good upbringing and academic background failed to see eye to eye. Four of them stood up while seven others sat down, the same flim-flam, the same taradiddle, where the light of knowledge and shadows of ignorance came to a twilight play of pathetic pride.

In fact pride stalks our minds

like a psychotic killer does the neighbourhoods at night, looking for victims to lash out in the passionate intensity of his deranged mind. Somehow, we don't realize that we are deranged in our haughtiness and intransigence, our attitude and behaviour hiding the sickness like the silencer muffles the sound of a gun.

There are so many ways pride infiltrates our lives, and then gradually hardens its muscles around the sensitive areas of our souls. Then our thoughts become rigid, our judgments sclerotic, visions blinded and minds closed. Perhaps pride works like silt, layer by layer its deposit creating the hard surface of arrogance. In petty pace the proud mind advances from complacency to confrontation as it gets convinced that a fight is not lost until the defeat is conceded.

Before one realizes, arrogance does its magic. It creates bullies amongst the barristers, demons amongst the doctors, wackos amongst the writers,

because the one and only thing everybody understands is force. And that force works not only through the finger that pulls the trigger or the muscle that intimidates the weak, but also through loquacity of the lawyers, erudition of the editors, jurisprudence of the judges, talent of the teachers, and power of the politicians.

Hence, our politics is stalled halfway between the power of pride and the pride of power, a bizarre pageant of the neurosis of arrogant women and men (in order of leaders and followers) who do not hesitate to use their power of hauteur to dominate others. If one political alliance has threatened with force and another has sabotaged with Machiavellian guiles, it is the unflinching arrogance of both sides, perhaps different in style but not in substance, which has ultimately translated into senseless showdown.

We have recently seen a similar showdown between the chief advisor and his, first estranged,

now former, four advisors where the arrogance of power replaced them as quickly as the power of arrogance had forced them to resign. It is possible that the chief advisor, in his other manifestation as the president of the country, finally sought to scoff at that standoff. He adopted the wisdom of the Munich Logic, a phrase coined after Israeli athletes were taken hostage during the Munich Olympics in 1972. It simply means that one should not appease the aggressors, no matter what.

But what the president did is meet arrogance with arrogance. He was taking decisions against the advice of his advisors. Here also one gets the smack of the same old problem of pride defying common sense. Stand up if asked to sit down, and sit down if asked to stand up. And pride intertwined with pride created many more pockets of arrogance. If anything, that is the only thing which has made progress in the course of last few months.

Right now, the solution may be clouded but the problem is clearly in sight. The presidency, the caretaker government and the election, looks like all three birds are lined up in the trajectory of a single stone. As political arrogance begets more political arrogance, these three institutions remain targets of arrogant minds keeping their guns at full-

cock.

Then what is the future of our politics? One day this president will not be there. If once burned is twice warned, the prospects for the caretaker government do not look very bright. Sooner or later, the political parties will go to the polls. But we are still going to be left face to face with our arrogance.

In case we do not know, arrogance is when the bribe taker doesn't think he is doing anything wrong. Arrogance is when the political activist has no qualms about stamping on his dead rival. Arrogance is when election commissioners don't want to quit. Arrogance is when the president wants to do what he likes. Arrogance is when politicians expect others to fix the mess created by them.

Let me put it in ballistics terms. If pride is the bullet then arrogance is the recoil of the gun. Our politics is not hitting targets because the impact of the recoil is much larger than the force of the bullet. Ban arrogance and take the recoil out of politics. Proper pride will see that the projectile travels far without having much propellant blast.

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Washington's Iraq dilemma: Why engaging Iran is a good idea

Iranian tough guys think Washington asks for favors in Iraq that Iran has no need to grant. Moreover, Iranian leaders know that they have less capacity to control the multiple Shiite actors in Iraq than the ISG assumes. Cooperating with Washington would expose this fact, thereby reducing perceptions of Iranian power.

GEORGE PERKOVICH

WASHINGTON: Sometimes a wish can mobilize the will and power to make it come true. The Iraq Study Group (ISG) wishes the US could "engage directly with Iran and Syria in order to try to obtain their commitment to constructive policies toward Iraq and other regional issues." Unfortunately, the US does not possess the types of power to force Iranian cooperation, and even if it did, Iran lacks the capacity to grant America's wish in Iraq. Still, the Study Group has done a service by making it obvious that the US should not reject dialogue with Iran as a matter of principle.

The ISG assumes that Iran's "interests would not be served by a failure of U.S. policy in Iraq that led to chaos and the territorial disintegration of the Iraqi state." This is neither entirely right nor

wrong. Possible US failure in Iraq can take several forms besides territorial disintegration, and Iranian actors may welcome lesser failures. Multiple factions tussle incessantly in Iran's power circles; some will always resist cooperation with the US and pursue tactics to weaken it.

Iraq is not the only arena of Iranian interest, nor is it the one where Tehran feels it needs to change its position most. Iran is more interested in winning recognition as the major power of the greater Middle East and gaining acceptance of its uranium--enrichment and plutonium--production programs. To make this happen, Iran wants the US to change its policies, not vice versa.

The ISG glides over the trade-offs that the US, Iran and other international actors would have to make to achieve win-win results. Henry Kissinger offered a realistic assessment in "The

Washington Post," noting that Iran "has no incentive to appear as a deus ex machina to enable America to escape its embarrassments, unless the United States retains an ability to fill the vacuum (left by an exit from Iraq) or at least be a factor filling it in." Iran must be disabused of the idea that "it is able to shape the future (of the region) on its own." But Kissinger, like the ISG, doesn't specify how Washington can realistically scare or entice Iranian decision-makers into accommodating US desires.

The ascendant militant Revolutionary Guard cohort represented by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad feels no need to change. For them, instability in Iraq reduces the capacity of the US to force regime change in Iran and raises the international political costs of military action. The Iranian populace looks to Iraq and says, "If this is what regime change and democ-

ratization bring, no thank you." The world has no tolerance for another US military adventure that would spike energy prices and foster more terrorism. Tehran concludes that the UN Security Council, thanks largely to Russia, lacks the will to impose the sorts of sanctions that stimulate internal debate over the costs versus benefits of continuing a nuclear program in defiance of international mandates. Iran's bellicose confrontation with Israel -- rhetorically and through support of Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad -- garners popular support among Sunni Arabs, lifting Iran's claim to represent the Muslim world.

Iranian tough guys think Washington asks for favors in Iraq that Iran has no need to grant. Moreover, Iranian leaders know that they have less capacity to control the multiple Shiite actors in Iraq than the ISG assumes. Cooperating with Washington would expose this fact, thereby reducing perceptions of Iranian power.

Indeed, agreeing to cooperate with Washington in Iraq might expose Iran to unwanted recriminations when sectarian violence continues. Washington would

inevitably accuse Iran of perfidy, setting back the cause of normalizing relations that cooperation might augment. Better to leave the mess in Washington's hands.

Despite the anger it will inevitably provoke, Iranian coyness could be a blessing in disguise. Washington should think twice about whether changing Iran's actions toward Iraq will improve international security as much as modifying Iran's nuclear program or ending its material support of groups that practice violent politics in Lebanon and Palestine. Iran will not "give away" changes in any area. It will be most inclined to trade some indecisive help in Iraq for accommodation of limited-scale uranium enrichment on Iranian territory, while insisting that Iran has neither the right nor the capacity to control Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

To avoid such trade-offs, the US and international community need greater power to exacerbate Iranian vulnerabilities in response to Iranian defiance or alleviate them in response to Iranian cooperation. None of the country's neighbors can be truly said to like Iran, even if the Arab "street" celebrates when revolu-

tionary personalities spit in the face of Israel and the US. The European Union, Russian, Chinese, Indian and other governments that deal with Iran generally find the experience exasperating. Iran's neighbors and outside powers want it to be contained. The problem is they don't trust the US to do it effectively and don't want to be seen cooperating with an American government loathed for its support of unjust Israeli expropriation of Palestinian property in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, as suggested by Steven Erlanger in "The New York Times" in November.

The Iranian economy cannot sustain a clerical regime that fails to produce meaningful employment opportunities for educated youth. Inflation and deficits rise while politicians squander oil revenues including the subsidizing of Hezbollah in Lebanon. With the current economic structure enriching the Revolutionary Guard and clerical establishments, neither is eager to embrace the opening to the international economy that the US and Europe offer as potential reward. But even if Iranian leaders did embrace integration with

the global economy, it would bring pain in the short term, while the gains are beyond the horizon of current officials. Such political expedience ultimately will be the downfall of the clerical regime, and the weakness should be exploited through explicit and de facto international sanctions. Yet, the lure of international economic cooperation to change Iranian behavior is not as great in the short term as the US and the EU would like.

None of this argues against direct dialogue and a willingness to explore trade-offs with Iranian decision-makers. However, Iran is no more likely to cooperate than the Bush administration did in 2002-2003 when Iran reached out to it. Ideological American leaders tragically and arrogantly overestimated their power then; Iran's deluded bellicose leaders appear likely to do the same now.

There is, however, a cost-free way to test whether dialogue might be productive. President Ahmadinejad has written two open letters to President Bush and the American people, in May and late November. While their contents have been dismissed as unworthy of response, these letters should be taken as a bid

for dialogue. If Bush were to proffer an eloquent response, exploring themes of international justice, Sunni-Shiite accommodation and the illegality of Iran's defiance of the Security Council's nuclear resolution, a dialogue would commence. The most difficult first step requires no negotiation. Global expectations would rise for continuation. Ahmadinejad gambles that his words increase Iran's soft power and leverage, but ultimately his esoteric extremism rings hollow. The US should articulate the justness and practicality of the UN Security Council's positions on Lebanon, the nuclear issue and terrorism in a dramatic correspondence for the world to read.

Iran does have weaknesses, and a dialogue can expose them, perhaps intensifying the country's internal fissures. Refusal to talk cedes the high ground to Iran without any benefit to Washington.

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