

## Time is fast running out Implement the package in full

LOOKING back on the initiatives taken by the caretaker government to come to grips with the Election Commission reform impasse, it would seem that numerically they have done quite a few things. But qualitatively these fall short of clinching a conclusive resolution of the logjam. The pattern of overtures has been that before one concession was given by the government it got swiftly overtaken by a negative approach to another demand on the list.

Moreover, all these came in dribs and drabs neutralising the overall impact of the concessions given. To make matters worse, dilly-dally and duplicity in handling the differences triggered an onrush of new issues complicating the whole exercise. It was invariably seen by the 14-party alliance that nothing short of an ultimatum could nudge the caretaker government into action, so the valuable time lost in addressing the pressing issues could be compensated. So far the entire approach from the top seemed characterised by non-transparency and behind-the-scenes moves with most people outside the inner circle being kept in the dark, more so ironically the advisers themselves who were at the frontline of negotiating with the 14-party alliance. No wonder, therefore, there is a palpable sense of unreality about the caretaker government's initiatives being out of steps with the situation on the ground.

So here we are 54 days down the line with a set of demands of the 14-party alliance having been met, yet because much water has flowed down the river we find an obvious disconnect between the governmental steps and the alliance's demands.

Most of the "questionable" people have now left the scene except Modabbir Hossain who must now follow suit. It is highly imperative for the government now to fully implement the package. Secondly, the voter list even after third attempt at updating has many loopholes requiring to be fixed on an absolutely top priority basis.

The focus must necessarily be on the limited time available for the election to make the best use of it by primarily re-adjusting the election schedule and getting an authentic electoral roll that is truly devoid of fake voters and complete with the inclusion of the newly eligible voters.

## Guntanamo Bay returnee

A clarification needed

EARLY this week, Mobarak, a Bangladeshi national held in the infamous Guantanamo Bay, was handed over to the Bangladeshi authorities in Dhaka by the US government. He had been detained at the Guantanamo Bay for long five years on suspicion of having possible links with the al-Qaeda.

But Mobarak on his arrival in Dhaka was promptly detained by the airport police and was remanded on the plea that he needed to be quizzed to see if he had any criminal record and verify his antecedents.

Surely, the US authorities released Mobarak after carrying out verification of records pertaining to him. In that light it begs clarification as to why he should be needed to be taken on remand and interrogated by our police.

We fail to understand as to why does he has to face an ordeal at home after being in exile and having undergone acute suffering for long five years in a foreign jail? Surely the inquest made by the US intelligence agencies has not found anything tangible against Mobarak otherwise he would not have been released at all. One is also likely to question why he was not produced before a court of law in twenty-four hours' time as mandated by law. The incident about Mobarak may also raise the question as to whether or not there are other Bangladeshis suffering a similar fate at the Guantanamo Bay?

We believe that Mobarak's detention may be viewed as being tantamount to a violation of his rights and of the statutory provision of the international covenants of Human Rights. We therefore strongly urge that the reason behind his arrest and subsequent findings, if any, be revealed for public knowledge. Government should issue a statement for public information sooner than later to allay misgiving that is bound to arise in the public mind having regard to the fact that the US government has released him simply because it had nothing against him.

## Shuffling the deck-chairs



ZAFAR SOBHAN

STRAIGHT TALK

**It is now quite apparent to most of the country that elections without the AL would be bogus and that for the army to thus man the barricades in the service of elections as is would be severely problematic. But, by the same token, if the army decides not to enforce the elections as is then it has to answer the question as to what exactly it will enforce and to what extent what it does will be acceptable to the general public.**

the extent of over-ruling his council of advisers on a routine basis. It was for this reason that the four advisers chose to resign earlier this month.

Even the ones who chose to remain did so not necessarily as a vote of confidence in the president or to signal that they were happy with how he was conducting affairs, but in the hope that they would still be able to influence things for the better and to do everything in their power to try to bring about free and fair elections.

The latest in the on-again-off-again saga is that election commissioner Zakaria will be asked to go on leave but not commissioner Modabbir. However, with less than 40 days of the 90 left in which to hold elections, it seems as though it is too little and far too late to make any difference now.

In fact, since the AL-led 14-party alliance made clear on December 18 that it would not go to elections under the current election schedule all this maneuvering seems to be little more than shuffling the deck-chairs on the Titanic. At this point, there doesn't seem like there is much sense in making these kinds of cosmetic changes.

Of course, this all could have been avoided. Had the reforms such as the removal of Aziz and Zakaria, reconstitution of the EC, and correction of the voter list been done at the start, then we would be well on our way to elections.

But these did not happen and the reason for this is that clearly the game-plan from the beginning was to declare the 90-day time-period for holding elections to be written in stone and to delay and foot-drag and stonewall and stall until it was

too late to make any meaningful change, all the while insisting that the 90-day time-frame had to be honoured.

So here we are. Once again we have changes which are too little to matter and offered too late in the day to make a difference. Even had they been agreed to a week ago, when it might have made a difference, the fact that the returning officers are still compromised and that police personnel have not been transferred and the voter list remains a mess means that it wouldn't have ensured much of anything, anyway.

Right now, it all seems like a bad joke, but, somehow, I am not laughing.

So where do we go from here? Thursday was a halt, and, if the AL is to be believed, was merely the first of many to come. If the AL-led

alliance has decided that it will not go to elections under the current schedule and with Iajuddin as chief adviser, then it doesn't seem to me as though it has much option except to continue with the agitation.

We have seen what the alliance is capable of in the past two months with the *oborodhs* that have shut the country down time and again. The only thing that is preventing a recurrence of such a situation is the threat of army in aid of civil administration. But it seems to me that, one way or the other, we are heading towards a major confrontation, and time is running out to avert it.

The big rallies of the past week have shown that both sides are powerful and popular and that likely neither side could win in a showdown. And since a showdown is what we are going to have come election day, if not before, one wonders where this leaves us.

As has been noted elsewhere, the army has helped to ensure security for elections in the past and there is nothing intrinsically sinister about appealing to its help for conducting elections. But the situation grows more complicated when one side wants to stand in the elections and the other side will mobilize everything in its power to

make sure that the elections do not happen.

It is an unenviable situation for the army and one fully understands the reported reluctance to enter the fray. Either way, someone is going to be unhappy.

It is now quite apparent to most of the country that elections without the AL would be bogus and that for the army to thus man the barricades in the service of elections as is would be severely problematic.

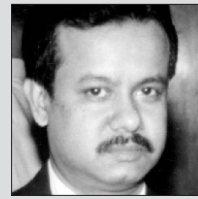
But, by the same token, if the army decides not to enforce the elections as is then it has to answer the question as to what exactly it will enforce and to what extent what it does will be acceptable to the general public.

Is there a way out, a compromise that could head off such a dire eventuality? I can see only one, and that is for Iajuddin to voluntarily relinquish the chief advisership and appoint, as per the Constitution, either Mahmudul Amin Choudhury or an eminent person in his stead.

But if that were a likely solution, then we wouldn't be here in the first place. So meanwhile we just continue shuffling the deckchairs as the water-level rises.

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## Ershad lost and found



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHASAN

CROSS TALK

**The fact remains that Ershad has been taken by one alliance for the same reason that Nizami has been taken by another. Both sides want to win the election, and they do not mind compromising standards to scrape a few extra votes. That is the sorry state of politics. All moral counts get lost in the count for votes.**



IT was a flip-flop, a somersault, but can be best described as a political high drama of lost and found. A former dictator was missing for couple of days, and then resurfaced on the grandstand of a mega rally in the theatrics of his incorrigible self. Hussein Mohammad Ershad, the fiftyish looking stylish octogenarian strongman, has done it again. He has been true to his slippery self that reminds one of a subway train. Now he is gone in the tunnel! Now he is out in the open!

And he did what he does best, putting up a great show again. He held his hands like they were tied and flung them apart as if a slave had just broken his chains. Then he asked for forgiveness for all his crimes. But the funniest part of his delivery was when he talked about going to jail and coming out dead. This is where he got muddled between being a coward or a hero. He said, in an outcry of defiance, that he was a soldier who was not afraid to die. Only hours ago he was hiding because something could happen to him.

Of course, matching words with action is not his strength. This man, a former soldier by profession, has always ducked under his words. If his words were any proof of his actions, one would like to wonder if he would drop his weapons and desert the battlefield if sent to a war. He expelled his brother from the

party. He abandoned one of his wives. When he was president of the country, he changed his prime ministers like menageries in the showcase. Friends and foes, family and fortune, he has been eclectic in his approach to life.

But the most devastating thing was to see him on the same stage with more respectable leaders. Yes,

together they looked like a formidable force as the sea of supporters swung with slogans. Still, reasonable minds could not help asking what that man was doing out there. Flashback some 16 years, and he was an enemy of the people. The entire country was asking him to step down.

So I would say that his weight on

the stage came to balance the scale. We don't know what will happen in the election. We don't even know whether, in the endless jousting between two political sides, the election can be at all held. But both sides have got one enemy of the people each, one from 1971 and another from 1990, and finally, no matter which side wins, we have

got the equilibrium of evil. If not the candidates, the voters should be happy. They have got a level playing field to cast their votes in.

The fact remains that Ershad has been taken by one alliance for the same reason that Nizami has been taken by another. Both sides want to win the election, and they do not mind compromising standards to scrape a few extra votes. That is the sorry state of politics. All moral counts get lost in the count for votes.

Still, what happened last Sunday has a moral odium that floats above the usual muck. The 14-party alliance might win the election, but it has lost the politics. Maybe winning is more important than politics to the generation of ageing leaders. Most of them might not be around to run for another election.

Perhaps it is the age factor that also pushed Ershad onto that stage to confess his misdeeds. It is possible that this confession was genuine, since closer to death most people tend to have the fear of God in their hearts. So if there was any revelation in what Ershad said or did on that stage, it is that the fountain of youth has dried up. That, maybe at long last, the fear of death has changed his heart.

Between Ershad and Jamaat, perhaps there is this one difference, more or less. He has said sorry for the wrongs he did for nine years, whereas the others are not willing to renounce what they did for nine months. Then again, it is not easy to trust a man who has never told the truth. Maybe he will vanish again, and reappear on another stage at another time by another sleight of hand and say something completely different.

It has been wrong that one alliance has taken a fallen dictator under its fold for the same reason it would have been wrong if the other had done the same. Theodore Roosevelt once said about

President Somoza of Nicaragua: "Somoza may be a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch." In a way it is pathetic that the once all-powerful Alldaddy should spend the last years of his life doing rotation in such expletives.

Honestly, the overthrown Big Boy has been bleeding his dignity in the arrogance to continue even after his shelf life had expired. Ershad should have left politics long ago, at least since he served the prison term. So should have some of the other leaders, people who have outlived their utility and overstayed the welcome. But then proprietary politics is like ancestral business. You do not retire until you are dead.

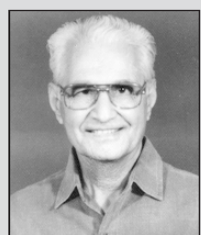
Ershad will be sorely missed if and when he is gone, because he epitomizes the absence of scruples that is the hallmark of our politics. He is a man of good taste who has lived in bad taste. His immaculate taste in clothes, shipshape appearance, and glad eye for women, all these were mired in contradictions as scandal after scandal dragged him down.

In Zorba the Greek, Nikos Kazantzakis writes: "What a strange machine man is! You fill him with bread, wine, fish, radishes, and out of him come sighs, laughter and dreams." For as long as Ershad will keep vanishing and emerging, he will remain in the news, and for so long as he will remain in the news he will remain a riddle. It is amazing how, after living a privileged life, well fed, well clad, what came out of that machine is a hollow man.

Last Sunday when Ershad got up on the stage, that hollowness was dispersed in the crowd. If a hollow man was lost, a hollow man was also found. That spoke amply for our politics as well.

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## Pakistan's new stance on Kashmir



MB NAQVI  
writes from Karachi

PLAIN WORDS

**Well, what has happened has happened. It cannot be undone. We had better do some course correction now. It is blindingly clear that there will be no war with India. At least Pakistan should avoid it at all costs. For a Pakistan Army general to offer recognition of India's sovereignty over Kashmir shows that, hitherto, the course followed was unrealistic and shortsighted.**

Valley being an integral part of India. India's Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh used the deft formulation: let's make the borders irrelevant; they will be there alright, but would not matter in the daily lives of the Kashmiri citizens of the two countries. To make this proposal more acceptable, Dr Singh has thrown in a yet-to-be-negotiated quantum of autonomy for the two Kashmiris, Indian and Pakistani (AJK). Pakistan has tentatively accepted this Indian idea and has, itself, developed the Indians' concept.

There are four aspects to Musharraf's Kashmir proposals. One is, of course, autonomy for the two Kashmiris. The second is the attempt to make the border soft -- "irrelevant" -- by allowing the Kashmiris on both sides of LOC to cross it more easily, and to conduct trade across it. How free that trade

will be has to be worked out. The third element is thinning out of the troops on both sides, although Musharraf's use of the term "demilitarisation" is unlikely to be acceptable to the Indian security establishment -- the true strength of which is now becoming clear. Finally, there has to be a joint mechanism between the two countries to manage the all-Kashmir problems that concern both parts, or arise from time to time.

President Musharraf has, thus, notionally recognized India's sovereignty over the parts of Kashmir it is occupying. That has a ring of finality about it. There is no point in the Pakistan Foreign Office saying that policy has not changed. It is a theoretical proposition. For the rest of the world, Pakistan has moved away from the old demand and is now open to others ideas.

There are also obscurities: Why

is Musharraf in such a terrible hurry, wanting a Kashmir solution within days and weeks. But he is a soldier, and should be credited with knowing his trade. New ideas preempt the threat of war. He and his ministers proclaim that no stable peace can come to South Asia without a satisfactory solution of the Kashmir problem. This implies that if the Indians do not accept Pakistan's pleas there is bound to be a war; stable peace is contingent on the desired settlement. It involves a threat from Pakistan's side.

History shows that all the wars, or semi-wars, with India had some linkage or other with Kashmir. The first two wars, in 1948 and 1965, were specifically over Kashmir. The 1971 war was about East Pakistan, though India's interests included Kashmir-related demands. While the Kutch clashes can be attributed to a general deterioration of Indo-

Pakistan relations, the Kargil adventure was clearly for forcing India to the negotiating table.

Now that India has been brought to the negotiating table -- two rounds of negotiations having failed, a third, or is it fourth, may soon take place -- President Musharraf's initial indication is that the likely Kashmir settlement is to be basically on India's terms. This arrangement could have been arrived at 5, 10 or 15 years ago. The reasons why Musharraf now proposes to recognize India's sovereignty over the Kashmir Valley, Jammu and Laddakh are based on hard realism, though it is painful for sentimental patriots to admit it.

The origins of Musharraf's formula, one finds, is in an American Study Group's report a few years ago. The coordinator was said to be Robert Oakley, then President of New York's Asia Society. There was also a book, based on this group's ideas, explaining this. But that, per se, is no disqualification. The US purpose could only be to free India of the embarrassment of constant anti-India propaganda by Pakistan over Kashmir. That was detrimental to India's being built up as a great bastion of freedom. Fundamental to Musharraf's ideas are, however, ground realities.

A war with India is now out of the question. Pakistan's minimum Nuclear Deterrent and the conventional arms preparedness together do not make war with India a practical proposal. The experience of the 2002 crisis, with two armies confronting each other eyeball-to-eyeball, showed that a nuclear war between these two neighbours is no longer possible. Note that India had credibly threatened to invade Pakistan, knowing that Pakistan was a nuclear power. George Fernandes had threatened that India could absorb Pakistan's first strike, but would retaliate massively and destroy its seven or eight industrial-military centres.

There is obvious truth in that. This means that India's larger deterrent has more deterring power than Pakistan's smaller one. Therefore, Pakistan cannot take the initiative to start another war, and whichever way another war starts it will not be to Pakistan's advantage. That changes the whole complexion of the Kashmir dispute: now no solution can be built on military force. Musharraf knows it, and it is good that he is proceeding on this basis. One agrees.

This will certainly cause much argumentation, and it should have

been known earlier. After spending money and human effort in building conventional and nuclear deterrents, we are faced with simple facts: India is a larger country with a larger deterrent; it is more developed; it is richer and more influential in the world. These facts should have been known earlier. Pakistan went to war so many times, but only to force India to the negotiating table -- a silly proposition. If you cannot solve a problem through war, how can diplomacy after an inconclusive war get you Kashmir? Why were the wars inconclusive? Because of Pakistan being poorer and weaker. Didn't Pakistani generals know this? Why should poor Pakistanis pay for a huge military establishment that has usurped people's political rights, subverted politics and foisted the army's unending domination over the whole polity.

Well, what has happened has happened. It cannot be undone. We had better do some course correction now. It is blindingly clear that there will be no war with India. At least Pakistan should avoid it at all costs. For a Pakistan Army general to offer recognition of India's sovereignty over Kashmir shows that, hitherto, the course followed was unrealistic and shortsighted.

That poses an urgent question

before Pakistanis. They have a large paraphernalia of military equipment, and nuclear deterrent complete with missiles, but what do they do with them? They are costly to maintain. Pakistan's economy could never sustain this establishment without foreign aid. Musharraf had himself said that Pakistan faces no external threat; only internal threats need attention. Why not reduce the military establishment and give people a peace dividend. Let this be a 2007 polls issue.

Also up for discussion is the question of what kind of development we need. Considerable disarmament and de-militarization are needed for the economy itself. Its main task must be to ensure all the democratic rights, including jobs for the maximum number of people, and social security for those who cannot be provided with jobs. The paradigm actually followed in recent years has increased disparities of income, both vertically and horizontally. We need a more pro-poor development paradigm. Social equity is an integral part of political freedom. Let's follow this paradigm.

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