

POLITICAL SCENE

New Options and Challenges Face Politicians

by Reazuddin Ahmed

South Africa: What Next?

President Frederick de Klerk of South Africa has taken one more step, and that too a bold one, towards changing the future of his country. Last Monday, the Population Registration Act which compelled all South Africans to be designated by race from birth was officially abrogated by an overwhelming majority of the country's three-chambered segregated parliament. Thus went into the dustbin of history the last of the country's apartheid laws, paving the way for long-awaited political and constitutional reforms.

As expected, the move has evoked favourable reactions, ranging from approval to expressions of delight, from anti-apartheid leaders, especially of the African National Congress, the white-dominated business and trade chambers and the international community, including the United Nations. Not surprisingly, the extremist white Boerestaat Party (BP) has condemned the move, raising the scare about a future where the whites would be "subjugated by a black regime."

The way has now been cleared for the next development which, President de Klerk hopes, would be the lifting of sanctions, an issue that has caused a division among western nations, such as the United States and Britain. In the opinion of Washington, four of the five conditions for ending the sanctions have been met, with the last one — the freeing of all prisoners of conscience — yet to be fulfilled. Since ANC would like the sanctions to continue, the United States may still maintain the status quo for a little longer. Other western nations and Japan may act more promptly in ending their economic restrictions against the Pretoria regime.

The ANC is, indeed, faced with a difficult choice. It will certainly please its western supporters, including the liberals, if it should agree to the lifting of international sanctions. It would not be surprising if Nelson Mandela, perhaps the most moderate of all ANC leaders, would go for such an accommodating course. However, the radical wing of the organisation, which had kept the anti-apartheid battle going for all these years, during the imprisonment of Mr Mandela, would staunchly oppose any relaxation. The argument that the South African President still has a long way to go in creating a new country cannot be dismissed all that easily.

The task now facing both the South African Government and ANC is to set the stage for political and constitutional reforms. This involves serious time consuming talks. By now, President de Klerk knows full well that it is one thing to dismantle apartheid, a job he has done much better than many had expected, and it is quite another thing to create a new political structure, based on democracy, equality of all people, and equitable economic opportunities for black, white and mixed races. Again, very little is known to the outside world about the political and constitutional framework that might have been tentatively discussed between President de Klerk and Mr Mandela. Indeed, nothing much has been heard on the ANC leader's thinking on political and economic protection that the new multi-racial South Africa could offer to the white minority, except that, on this controversial issue, his views have tended to be moderate.

So far, developments in South Africa have followed a steady, positive course. There are now grounds for hope that with President de Klerk and Mr Mandela in command of the situation, South Africa may well be entering a new era in a matter of years. We look forward to seeing Nelson Mandela take over as the President of South Africa while he is still fit and in good health. The country owes him this honour.

Eating Less, Eating Better

It is an irony that in this country where the overwhelming majority does not get even one meal a day, the small minority that eats well is consuming the wrong kind of food — and far too much of it — which is directly linked to heart diseases, high blood pressure, diabetes and a few other diseases. All these ailments are definitely on the increase in our urban centres, while in rural areas, millions fall victims to malnutrition.

It is high time that members of the middle class and the affluent society took a good look at what they eat at their regular meals, not to mention their wedding banquets or during festivals, like the one which falls on Monday. There is no denying that most of these meals — over-cooked, over-fried and over-spiced — contain too much fat and calorie, and not enough nutrition and protein. In many homes, red meat is preferred to green vegetables, liver and kidney curry to a piece of grilled fish, buttered toast and egg to chapati and dal. Most educated heads of family know full well that these so-called delicious dishes hurt their pockets as much as they harm their health. Unfortunately, they are too stuck to their traditional eating habits to plan a change in their dietary system.

We should be talking on this subject more and more as an essential part of our health education. That's a reason why we welcome the visit of a dietary expert from Thailand, Ms Aporn Samad whom we featured in our paper on Wednesday. Her specialisation lies in macrobiotic dietary system which places emphasis on whole cereal grains, like brown rice, soup, vegetables and sea food. What the expert who, married to a Bangladeshi in Bangkok, knows this country well said to our feature writer made a lot of sense. During the next few days, she will be talking to others at various fora and giving cooking demonstrations. We are sure, Ms Samad will be able to convince a lot of people, especially housewives, that one way of cutting down on one's food bill and, indeed, on possible hospital expenses is to go the macrobiotic way. She should also succeed in setting up a Bangladesh macrobiotic group to continue with the work started by herself during this visit.

If the joint declaration of the mainstream political parties is any reflection of a national consensus to institutionalised democracy, then probably we are very close to achieving it. The dramatic turn in country's political scene, following ruling party's decision to go back to parliamentary form of government, has raised hopes for a national agreement in fulfilling the democratic aspiration of the people.

The opposition political parties were unitedly insisting on reverting to parliamentary system and now ruling party's decision to move the constitutional amendment bill to this effect has greatly influenced Jatiya Party to change its stand on presidential form of government. Thus all political parties, probably for the first time in our national history, are seemingly united on a fundamental political issue like form of government. The demonstration of the spirit of unity is undoubtedly a good beginning for democracy and national development.

The ruling party will move the constitutional amendment bill providing for parliamentary system and transfer of power to BNP cabinet immediately after the Eid. Just now, the constitutional experts are giving a final touch to the draft bill. The opposition political parties are waiting to know the contents of the bill, although informally they know what is in the bill from BNP leaders.

Awami League leader Abdus Samad Azad and Workers Party leader Rashed Khan Menon are expected to move two bills on the form of government on any private members' day. But the bills are yet to be cleared by the Acting President, which is a procedural compulsion. This may delay the placing of their bills and in all probability the official bill will be tabled long before the private members' bills on the constitution. Meanwhile, the BNP sources dismissed the possibility of any major difference on the bill between the treasury bench and

the opposition. The sources told this writer that the opposition will find all their views reflected in the official bill.

The constitutional experts have been asked to take care of the instability factors inherent in a parliamentary form of government. The ruling party, in fact, was little hesitant to change from presidential system due to instability of the parliamentary form of government. The recent Indian experience caused concern among the top leaders of the BNP about the stability of the government. In India, Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar formed a group within Janata Dal by changing the name as Janata Dal (Socialist) and thus qualified to retain membership even after defecting from the

It is the democratic culture and attitude which ensures stability to a system — either presidential or parliamentary If we ignore democratic norms, even parliamentary form can get us into a crisis.

mother party. Although floor crossing by individual member is prohibited in Indian constitution, it has been allowed in group. This may well be cited as a convention in other democratic countries. Most probably the BNP constitutional experts will plug this hole. In our constitution, floor crossing by individuals is prohibited. Article 70 of the constitution provides that "a person elected as a member of the parliament in an election in which he was nominated as a candidate by a political party shall vacate his seat if he resigns from the party or votes against that party." But there is no provision in our constitution to check floor crossing in a group.

The ruling party is also thinking about a stricter provision for coalition partners in a government. In the event of a coalition the stability of the government is uncertain because the coalition partner or partners may quit the government any time. The parliamentary system in the then Pakistan saw frequent changes of government in the 50's.

In India, the two coalition governments — one of Morarjee Desai and the other of Vishwanath Pratap Singh — collapsed as the Bharatiya Janata Party deserted the coalition. The present scenario in India also indicates an uncertain future for parliamentary democracy. Under this situation BNP will obviously move the bill plugging all possible holes in the system. The stability of the system should not be the concern of the ruling party alone. The politicians must face the new options and challenges together. The collapse of the system will not affect BNP alone. It will affect the system as a whole.

Therefore, there should be a consensus on the stability aspect of the system to stop a future reversal.

The arbitrary power of the President, although titular head of the State in a parliamentary system, regarding dissolution of the parliament is considered as a major source of instability factor in the system. In 1990 Indian President dissolved the parliament without giving any chance to Jagjivan Ram to test his strength in the House. The present President of India neither heard V P Singh when he advised the President to dissolve the parliament. In Pakistan, President Ghulam Ishaque Khan dismissed Benazir Bhutto's government and dissolved the parliament without consulting the Prime Minister. BNP constitutional experts are looking for safeguards against such weaknesses. The new provision may call for a written advice by the Prime Minister in case of the dissolution of the parliament. The president in a parliamentary form of government holds ceremonial position. But he

becomes extra-ordinarily powerful on two occasions — (a) in inviting a leader to form the government (in doing so he may call upon the leader of a minority party to form government and to test popularity later), and (b) in dissolving a parliament.

Bangladesh Nationalist Party is expected to include the provision of taking at least one fifth of the ministers from among the non-members. The provision is already there in our constitution. Awami League leaders have hinted that they will oppose this provision as they do not want a non-member to hold any position in the cabinet. They argue that since

soon. This is the first official confirmation that BNP is moving the bill to revert to parliamentary form of government. BNP top notches were sceptical about the stability of the system and hence they delayed the decision. The dramatic turn in BNP's decision came in the backdrop of the recent political crisis over the diarchy in administration. Acting President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed cautioned about the danger of the diarchy in administration in the event of delay in transfer of power. Acting President's address to the nation helped BNP to take a decision on this issue quicker than expected. This has ended all speculations about the system of government and defused the political

tension. The ruling party has gained by this decision, says political analysts. Yes, it is true that the BNP will gain at least in the short run by switching over to parliamentary form of government. The lone live political issue of the opposition has been successfully buried by the ruling party by this sudden and dramatic decision.

The opposition Awami League which was sharpening the knife to use against BNP calling in an autocratic party is now politically defused. Awami League retains two political issues to be pursued in the future: one is secularism and the other is socialism. These two issues may not give Awami League any edge over BNP in politics, not certainly in near future.

Although BNP will gain by the reversal of the system at the moment, the leadership will remain under constant pressure from within and outside the party in the parliament. The situation shall have to be faced by democratisation of the decision making process at all levels — both intra-party

and inter-party. The basic stability of the parliamentary system is the democratic culture. At the dawn of independence, Bangladesh started with the parliamentary form of government. The country had one of the best constitutions in 1972 in the developing world, guaranteeing all fundamental rights. But the lack of democratic culture led to intolerance and in a dramatic suddenness Awami League which championed the cause of democracy since 1974, switched over to a one-party autocratic system. A vital question still remains unanswered: what prompted a populist government to go for one-party autocratic system and presidential form of government? The parliamentary system did not fail at the time and Awami League had two-thirds majority in the House. What I mean to say by this is that, it is not the system which matters. It is the democratic culture and attitude which ensures stability to a system either presidential or parliamentary.

If democracy is practised sincerely, then both the systems are democratic. But if we ignore the democratic norms, even parliamentary form can get us into a crisis. In our country we had many of the undemocratic black laws passed during the parliamentary form of government. Which is to be blamed for this, the system or the leadership?

Now that everything is set for switching over to the parliamentary form of government within the next few weeks, people expect from the political leadership more consensus decisions on basic national issues in the field of development. The nation is confronted with problems of overpopulation, inefficiency in the public sector, national wastage and display of arms in the educational institutions. People, as a whole, look forward to seeing their leaders lay the foundation of a strong democratic system, one which will withstand the test of time.

Philippines Fumbles in Talks on US Bases

Abby Tan writes from Manila

THE deadlock in negotiations on the future of United States military bases in the Philippines has focused attention on the uneasy state of relations between the two allies.

Observers note that the talks have managed to highlight the Philippines' dependence on the US and the country's lack of vision in contemplating a future without the bases.

Washington, for its part, is showing increasing fatigue with an ally that hosts its most important military facilities in the Asia-Pacific region.

Both sides want to conclude a treaty before the current leases on Clark air base, Subic naval station and four smaller communications facilities expire on September 16.

When the sixth and final round of talks ended on May 3 in Manila, the two sides were stalemated on the key issues of how much the US should pay and how long the bases should stay.

The US wants a 10-year extension for a compensation of US\$360 million a year. The Philippines offered seven years but wanted \$825 million a year, \$400 million of it to be in appropriated funds and the rest to be non-budgetary items like trade access, surplus military equipment and food and development aid.

During the year of talking, the US agreed to reduce its military presence in the region but insisted it wanted to remain a Pacific power. Accordingly, it removed two squadrons of fighter jets from Clark, transferred its only Philippines-based warship from Subic, surrendered two small communications facilities and agreed to joint use of

Washington is showing signs of becoming increasingly testy with the Philippines, which hosts its two major military installations, Clark air base and Subic naval station. Negotiations on the future of the bases have stalled on wrangles about how much the US should pay and for how long the bases should stay.

US forces in the Philippines



Philippines Foreign Secretary Paul Manglapus

Clark air base 13th Air Force
Area: 55,000 hectares
Military personnel: 9,800
Civilians: 800
Dependants: 12,000
Injection into economy: \$115m.
Capacity: 800 aircraft
Subic naval base Radar & supply depot of US 7th Fleet
Area: 26,000 hectares (11,000 water)
Military personnel: 5,500
Civilians: 500
Dependants: 6,200
Injection into economy: \$200m.
Ships in port daily: 12

its bases with the Philippine military.

The Philippine position appeared confused. It demanded the US reduce its military presence in the country, but also wanted higher compensation, and at the same time it threatened to throw the US out.

Philippine foreign secretary and chief negotiator Raul

Manglapus and many senators have said the bases are their best leverage to get more aid. But this tactic has instead had the effect of undermining political goodwill in Washington. US negotiator Richard Armitage said the US had made its last offer and would not accede to demands for debt condonation or more generous trade access.

Manglapus said the US could afford a further \$40 million to close the gap on the \$400 million hard cash component. But a US official close to the talks said the political will isn't there in Washington. He added: "In numerical terms, the difference is small, but in political terms the difference between \$360 million and \$400 million is as vast as

the Pacific Ocean".

US officials are disappointed that instead of taking tough decisions to re-structure the economy, the Filipinos asked for forgiveness of their debts. The official said: "They have shown no ability to follow through to develop a growth strategy and get out of their debts."

Major donors have pressed the Philippines to free investment rules to make the country more attractive to business and to make painful economic reforms.

In refusing to tie trade to the bases, the US says the Philippines has the second largest sugar quota, the fifth largest textile quota and is overall the fourth largest recipient of US aid. One of its aid programmes if the Multilateral aid initiative (MAI), a foreign-funded programme which enables the Philippines to tap \$10 billion over five years. US officials said they were puzzled that the Philippines should feel neglected.

The Philippines negotiating panel appeared unprepared from the outset, and lacking the skills to negotiate an international treaty.

Manglapus announced that the Philippines wanted money from the bases to bankroll a bond to be sold to neighbouring states who benefit from the US military presence. When Japan and the Association of

Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) reacted coolly, Manglapus withdrew the idea.

The panel's penchant for thinking aloud before its ideas could crystallise, showed it had no strategy in the talks. For example, its demand that the Philippines take back Clark base by September was a hollow threat.

A so-called "bases conversion plan" drawn up by a team of academics over 14 months and after millions of pesos had been spent, turned out to be a dud. The "how-to" was missing.

The bases are important to the country's economic life. About 70,000 Filipinos are directly employed in them and up to half a million others are indirectly dependent on the facilities. US military spending contributes 5 per cent to the gross national product.

The negotiating panel was afraid that the Philippines Senate would refuse to ratify the treaty if the duration for the bases was more than seven years. Hence it took a tough stand on that and on compensation. Its call to the US to give in to Philippine demands has been met by a curt Washington ultimatum to declare if Manila wanted to continue its security relationship.

President Corason Aquino has not taken any initiative in the bases issues and has let the negotiations wing in many directions. But given the two sides' desire to conclude a treaty, analysts feel the Philippines' lack of leverage has been a genuine acknowledged soon. — GEMINI NEWS

ABBY TAN is a Singaporean journalist specialising in economic and political affairs. She has been based in Manila since 1977.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Give a thought

Sir, Two of the greatest festivals of Muslims are Eid-ul-Fitr and the Eid-ul-Adha, both of which bring joy and happiness to the rich and poor, big and small alike. But unlike the Eid-ul-Fitr this year the joys of Eid-ul-Adha will be overshadowed with a hint of sadness, because there is awareness, and in some cases a twist of conscience regarding the terrible tragedy that took place on the 29th of April when the devastating cyclone claimed thousands of lives of innocent

men, women and children. Although we can do little except donate to the people who are alive, but have lost everything, our conscience still smites us, and reminds us to be a little less extravagant this year. That brings us to the question of Qurbani; yes the thought seems to have crossed on the minds of many of us. What if we don't sacrifice cows and goats this year? Instead we donate the animals or better still, we donate the amount we plan to spend on buying cows and goats for sacrifice

during Eid-ul-Adha? Isn't helping the desperately poor a sacrifice? After all we do give away the major portion of the meat to the poor, then why not give away the whole animal? The satisfaction of seeing the joy and happiness on the faces of the people we help will be like an aura in our hearts — that itself would be the answer to the big question of whether you have obtained the sacrifice, that was ordained to you.

When one of the ladies brought up the subject at the monthly meeting of our club it was wonderful to see the support she got, it seemed like most of our members (women of varied business and professions) agreed not to give Qurbani but to give away the money or the animal to the poor. After discussing at length and convincing those who were in doubt, all of us were satisfied that we were doing

the right thing.

Let us hope this sacred thought sways our innermost conscience and all of us do what we think is the right thing. After all we all know Qurbani Eid will be here again next year.

Ms Lally Maula
President
Zonta Club 1, Dhaka.

VIP tax payers

Sir, If the administrative measures can be implemented effectively, the new national budget, in my view, will yield positive impact on our economy. Meanwhile, I do not support the idea of introducing VIP tax-payers' list. Because such recognition will create another superior class in our society. The previous autocratic government had seriously undermined the status and dignity of the working

class by declaring certain public thoroughfares as 'VIP roads'.

We sincerely hope that the democratic government will refrain from doing anything which may injure the feelings and dignity of the majority of people without whose active contribution and service the affluent section could never even think of becoming VIP tax-payers. It should not be forgotten that the poor public is also paying VAT.

M. Zahidul Haque
Assistant Professor,
Bangladesh Agricultural
Institute, Dhaka-1207.

Col. (retd.) Farook

Sir, Your front page report on the utterances of retired Colonel Farook, chairman of Freedom Party, under the heading: 'Shahabuddin should

have quit as Chief Justice' (June 10) was most interesting a reading. The retired Colonel's sweeping remark "the propaganda about the joint declaration of the three alliances of November, 1990, was nothing but psychological warfare against the popular verdict of the people expressed in the last parliamentary election" is nothing but centrifugal to issues which do not have anything to do with our present parliament. I would like Col. Farook to explain what good or bad would have happened if the Chief Justice had resigned from the office immediately after taking oath of office and what he meant by the allegation that "the Acting President by words or actions supported the viewpoints of a certain party".

Nahasha Kamal,
Dhaka.