

Is it of Any Significance?

Prime Minister, Khaleda Zia, has at last made her move. Will it bring any new life into her moribund cabinet, or will it continue in its lethargic pace? Only time will tell. However, on the face of it, the action appears more like window dressing, than anything of substance. What has happened, is that the cabinet has been expanded by a total of three members, and the portfolios of several others have been reallocated.

The question is, do these changes reflect any new thinking on the part of the PM, or is it just accommodating a few who have served her best during the recent past? Serious reservations have been expressed over the last two and half years about the competence and performance of Begum Zia's cabinet colleagues. From complete inaction to total incompetence have been the range of complaints about several ministers. Much of the deliberations of the BNP councillors, during the just concluded session, bore testimony to the frustrations people felt at the "non-performance" of many of the present cabinet ministers.

In the background of all this, comes Monday's move. Significantly, it does not entail removal or changes of portfolios of any important minister. Except for the resignation of Shamsul Islam Khan, no important change resulted from the PM's move. From the outside, it appears that the changes brought about have no pattern. The fact that making a good cabinet entails more than attaching portfolios to names, appears to have been lost on this government. On what criteria are cabinet posts distributed? Is there no relationship between professional qualification and ministerial assignment? It would be nice to know if there is any performance assessment of the ministers. The ministers whose portfolios have been changed — was it due to incompetence, inefficiency, internal discord, or just as a matter of routine? If the reason is any one, other than the last, then why give them another assignment? If it is just routine, then why stop with only a few?

The most obvious reason why the long awaited reshuffle has failed to kindle too much enthusiasm is, because it does not give any impression of deep thinking. For example, why give Moin Khan, a scientist, the portfolio of planning, when the newly created ministry of science and technology could use his talent so much better?

It should be lost on nobody that the last two and half years' performance of Begum Zia's cabinet is singularly devoid of any significant breakthrough in any of the priority areas. Except for finance, there has been no other ministry that showed any innovativeness. In commerce, industry and agriculture, three of our most important areas, nothing of significance happened. Education, in which the PM has laid so much emphasis, except paying lip-service little else has been done. And then, of course, there are ministers who were so busy cutting ribbons and saying the most controversial and ridiculous things, that they hardly find any time to concentrate on their own work.

It is understandable that political leaders will, and do, take up different ministerial tasks at different times. But what is not being fully appreciated here is that, modern governance is far more technical and complex than it was ever before. Heading a ministry requires more knowledge and managerial ability than it did in the past. Appointing ministers purely on political grounds, opens the door for too much dependence on bureaucracy and makes them vulnerable to official manipulations.

Let us hope that the recent changes belie our scepticism and generate the much needed dynamism in the government.

A Test of Governance

A Daily Star headline brought out all the irony in the world, on Saturday. It read "Adarsha Grams in Pitable Condition". The villages so called are all situated on the Bay side low land beyond Maijdee Court and Sonagazi of the greater Noakhali district. Hundreds of thousands of people have time and again been devastated by cyclones and tidal bores in this zone and many of them have lost their near ones and also the means to survive past the human challenges they were spared to grapple with.

The government tried to come to their help. Hundreds of families, reduced to destitution in the above process, were settled in new villages — not far from where they lost their all. The settlements were called, God alone knows why, "Adarsha Gram" or ideal villages. All this was a matter of 1984-85. In the years that have passed since, the new community has only stagnated to ever lower depths of privation and degradation. Factors contributing mainly to their misery were lack of any land other than the shelter built for them by government — and absence of any kind of farm jobs or other employment. At the time of their settlement, the government decision was to give everyone of these families two acres of land. Although the same government continued on the saddle for another six years — and could do anything it wanted at any time it chose to, being dictatorial in nature — not even two chhatkats of land were made over to any of these families. The settlers of the 'Adarsha' villages were left in a limbo as if to stew in their own juice. But they weren't left with much juice when they were settled.

The present government has by now got its bearings about the business called governance. Not that it should have taken much time to do that for to facilitate a ready transition to effective governance the new government had inducted very many old and practised hands on to its podium of power. With a very powerful bureaucracy ensuring an undisturbed continuity of government, no matter how different the newcomers to power were from those that had been eased out, for things like those paltry two acres of land it continued to be its self-same old setup.

But the element of democracy — the point of difference between the two kinds of dispensations, should have meant change, howsoever little. Democracy, for those settlers of the 'Adarsha' villages should have meant those two acres of land — of which there is no dearth in the polder-like char developments in the zone.

Sure enough the naming of those villages were rather presumptuous. That is the way all dictators and autocrats like to leave an imprint on things. Maybe it is not altogether unfair that Ershad is paying for his flamboyance and other liberties he had taken with this new-emerging polity. But why should the poor souls in the 'Adarsha' villages suffer?

It is a small matter — these two acres — but yet it means much. The test of governance comes in from a myriad points and quarters. Good governance has to respond to all of these.

THE Lahore High Court has pronounced a judgment which has a lesson for what the Narasimha Rao government is seeking to do through the law on religion. The judge has observed that accountability before election is against the mandate of the constitution. He was commenting on a petition, praying to the court to disqualify former assembly members through summary proceedings.

Even if any material existed against a member, the judge said, proceedings would have to be initiated to prove the alleged misconduct. That would require recording of evidence and holding of detailed inquiry, which might not be completed before the date of election. Our legislation on religion does not demand even a fraction of that. The revised version is no better.

Any contestant can be debarred from election if the scrutinising agency of nomination papers comes to believe that he or she had any time created ill will between classes on the basis of religion (consideration on the ground of language, race or caste has been deleted to placate the Left and the National Front). Even in the midst of polling campaign, the entire process can be halted on the same charge. A wronged candidate can file a petition which, like any other petition, will be considered after the election.

This is a loaded legislation, which can black the best of candidates and the most popular parties. The executive or, for that matter, the ruling party will be able to interfere through scrutinising authorities, however high, since they are the government appointees. We have seen how the high court judges have behaved in the Bofors gun pay-offs. The Supreme Court came to the rescue. A candidate, whose nomination

Accountability before Polls : Dilemma in Banning Religious Parties in India

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nation papers have been rejected on the basis of his religion propensities, cannot go to the Supreme Court before the polling. There is no yardstick to assess whether a candidate is habituated to mix religion with politics; it will be all subjective and the Congress party is known for its penchant to pressurise the judiciary.

Certain persons in Indira Gandhi's camp did go over an exercise to control the election in 1977 in the wake of the emergency, particularly when her son Sanjay Gandhi, then all powerful, was dead against the polls. But the mood of the electorate was so volatile that none dared to cross their path. The people had their revenge.

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decades. There are numerous judgments, which have unseated those who have used religious symbols or invoked the names of God. The people have themselves been severe on bodies with mere religious appeals. The legislation for the purpose will only mutilate the process which has worked, by large, well.

In fact, the government is not clear what it means by religion. In the English version of the legislation, the word used is

old Vedantic ideal of the life-force which is the inner base of everything that exists." He has dogmas and religious jargons, not spiritualism.

The real reason for the legislation is not the misuse of religion but Rao's fear of losing in the assembly elections in November in the four Hindi-speaking states, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. Rao realises that if the Congress were defeated — a distinct pos-

ition. Is the bill meant to remove that impression? His distance from religion can well be seen from the way his trips to temples and murtis are exhibited on the government-controlled television; he uses them for political ends.

The Bharatiya Janata Party's plank is not religious. It is communal. To fight it, communalism has to be fought, the insidious campaign against Muslims. It is an ideological battle and it has to be combated at that level. The nation has defeated more than once the BJP or whatever its earlier incarnations were. It got respectability after the Janata took it under its wings in 1977 in the wake of the emergency, expecting that Mrs Gandhi's authoritarian policies would have changed its concept of one-religion authoritarianism.

The BJP has openly opted for communal line. Secular forces, which believe in not using religion for political purposes, should oppose the party politically. That battle, however long, will save democracy and our pluralistic society, not the legislation, which may make even Singhals, Mahajans and Joshis look reasonable.

Those who are engaged in this fight cannot afford to make silly mistakes like depicting Ram and Sita as brother and sister. The Ramayan and Mahabharat, whatever the pronouncements of historians, are

part and parcel of Hindu sentiments. One cannot mock at them. At the same time, the government and the BJP cannot pick on the naivete to feather their political nests, as they have done.

Unnecessary furor was created over the dancer Sonal Mansingh episode. She was allowed to speak and also given the right to reply at the convention. What some persons and the convenors of the function felt was that an artiste of her standing and caliber should not have given credibility to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, which sullied the fair name of our pluralistic society by pulling down the Babri Masjid after, among other things, giving assurance to the Supreme Court not to harm the structure. She still went to New York.

Some liberals are trying to ride two horses at the same time. They believe that criticising the BJP or such other organisations is all right but having no truck with them is denying them their right to be heard. The BJP men have all the forums and they are misusing them to the hilt. By associating with them, liberals are giving credibility to such elements as are out to destroy the basics of our secular society, — not mixing religion with politics.

Another danger, still incipient, is being posed by Muslim communalists. They are trying to reassemble themselves in small groups under different names. The madrasas are being specially misused. Muslim communalism has to be hit on the head as forcibly as Hindu communalism. That should have been the agenda before the nation, not the legislation on religion which will only divert our attention from the real task and probably lull us into complacency that the law will take care of communal problem.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

How a 'Safe Area' Survives amid Ruins of War

THROUGHOUT the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which erupted in April 1992, attention has focused largely on events in the east and centre of the republic, as well as in the capital, Sarajevo.

Comparatively little notice has been paid to the north-west of the country, which has remained solidly under Bosnian government control. With the town of Bihać at its heart, the region, known as Cazinska Krajina, has survived repeated Serbian attempts to conquer it. And should the ethnically divided map of the republic ever be agreed upon, it will be designated as "Muslim territory".

Cazinska Krajina is bordered to the north and west by the "Republic of Serbian Krajina" in occupied Croatia, and to the south and east by Bosnian Serb forces. Visitors coming in pass through Serb, Croat and Bosnian checkpoints in quick succession. Once inside, there is a striking feeling of tranquility.

Declared a United Nations Safe Area on May 6, Bihać has lived up to the name more than any of the other five so-called UN protected zones. In Velika Kladusa, the first town across the border, people sit in cafes and laze around in the evening sun. Bihać has not had to bear the kind of siege that the citizens of Sarajevo have suffered. Nor has it witnessed the same level of atrocities which Serb forces have committed in Srebrenica, Cerska, Zepa, Gorazde, Banja Luka and elsewhere.

Declared a United Nations

Bosnia: the partition plan



In 1987, Abdic was jailed by the Yugoslav authorities on corruption charges. Yet emerging from prison in time for the rise of Bosnian nationalism, Abdic, known locally as "Babo", or "Daddy", became a leader of the Muslim Party of Democratic Action (SDA). During the elections for the Bosnian presidency in 1990, Abdic received the most votes. Cazinska Krajina was his power base.

He is widely credited as being the man who has maintained the circulation of food and money in the area. There was recent speculation that he would openly challenge President Alija Izetbegovic for the Bosnian leadership. However, another scandal has recently been thrown at him by, among others, the Austrian government. The allegation is that Abdic has been profiteering from humanitarian aid donations.

Yet Nedzara, 21 year old whose pharmacy studies at Sarajevo University were disrupted by the war, is able to forgive. "Fikret (Abdic) may profit," she says, referring to the rampant black market in the area, "but at least we profit too."

There are two key factors involved in the survival of Bihać. Firstly there is Fikret Abdic, a member of the Bosnian collective presidency and a successful entrepreneur who built up the Agrokomer food company.

The dizzying succession of complex maps spewing out of peace conferences on the former Yugoslavia all contain areas which are not regarded as being disputed. One of these areas is the Cazinska Krajina region in Northwest Bosnia, where a relative calm reigns. The Bosnian government remains firmly in control in the region, and has even formed an alliance with the Croats — in contrast to the situation in other parts of Bosnia. Gemini News Service looks into the secret of its success.

handsome, boisterous man from the predominantly Muslim Sandzak region of Serbia. Allied to the local Croatian Defence Council (HVO), and numbering about 30,000 troops, the Fifth Corps has managed to hold back the roughly 60,000 Serbian troops surrounding Cazinska Krajina.

Drekovic, a former Yugoslav army officer, prides himself on having organised a proper army. All his soldiers wear uniforms and jump to attention when he strides past. Their weapons are drawn from Yugoslav army stockpiles, but are by no means sufficient.

A tank and a few armoured personnel carriers have been seized from Serb forces. Additionally, there is a munitions factory in Bihać which keeps the troops on the frontline supplied. "People here have great respect for Drekovic," says Enko, local cafe owner. "He created the Fifth Corps. He's a real leader and a good soldier."

Pride in the endurance of Bihać goes back to World War Two, when the local partisan unit was one of the most accomplished in Yugoslavia.

Bjub Topic, President of the Bihać Regional Assembly, believes that Bihać can set an example for the rest of Bosnia, es-

pecially in terms of good relations between Croats and Muslims, which have completely disintegrated in central Bosnia.

The area produces one third of the total food requirement, with the UNHCR and the convoys driven by the French UN battalion providing the other two thirds. The economy is also boosted by the roughly 15,000 Bosnian workers from the area who send remittances from abroad.

Topic is keen to point out the secularism of the Bihać Muslims. "I used to go to see my uncle in Zepa (a town in eastern Bosnia)," he says "and he used to get angry with me for not going to mosque. Here, religion is a completely private affair."

Although Topic scoffs at the notion that the Sarajevo government is bent on bringing Islamic radicalism to Bosnia, he is keen to point out the secularism of Bihać's Muslims. "As the westernmost area of Bosnia, we look towards Europe," Topic says. "There is a different culture and different mentality here."

Commandant Drekovic also makes the same point. Watching Croatian TV at his headquarters, he sneers at a report about the seizure of an

arms cache destined for Bosnian forces, which features as close-up of an Iraqi passport, adding: "This is just Croatian propaganda about fundamentalism."

Drekovic, meanwhile, is a forceful advocate of a unitary Bosnia. At an impressive military rally in Velika Kladusa on the first anniversary of the formation of the Fifth Corps on August 17, 1992, he told the assembled troops that "the Serb fascists are committing genocide against the Muslim people, but we are not fighting for our faith. Our goal must be a united Bosnia which protects the rights of all its constituent na-

tions. Despite the fact that Fikret Abdic's portrait hangs in official buildings, people do criticise him. According to Topic, the government has failed to get its act together: "They fly around the world going to conferences. But they have not put any infrastructure on the ground." Abdic, he says, is a man who cares about practicalities, unlike the "more spiritual" Izetbegovic. "Fikret thinks ten years ahead."

Not everybody agrees. Afif, a Bosnian soldier and Izetbegovic

loyalist who has fought on Mount Igman, which overlooks Sarajevo, declares that "Fikret Abdic has sold out Bosnia for the sake of some tinmed goods." Afif thinks that Abdic would willingly accept division in order to stabilise his position in Bihać. His view is echoed by Bosnian activists and politicians in Sarajevo and abroad. "The man is really a criminal," says Adil Zulfikarpasic, leader of the opposition Bosnian Liberal Party and head of the Zurich-based Bosnian Institute.

For all of the persistence of Bihać and its citizens, and the raging arguments about Fikret Abdic, the area remains under the watchful eye of the Serbs. For the time being, calm prevails. Yet in the West finally concedes to the division of Bosnia and the collapse of Sarajevo, Bihać will be little more than a Muslim Bantustan. Topic says that Sarajevo is the head of the snake which Serb forces are trying to kill. Without a country, Bihać and the Cazinska Krajina region will die.

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OPINION

Crop Insurance

In a country like Bangladesh where nearly 80% of the people, if not more, depend on agriculture either directly or indirectly for their livelihood and where the vagaries of nature are so severe and recurrent that a sustainable progress in the agricultural sector seems an uphill task. However, thanks to the efforts of our farmers and the meaningful use of crop-fertiliser-water technology, they have achieved a near self-sufficient situation.

Recently scientist emeritus Prof. Kazi Badruddoza, at a seminar, underscored the need for commercialisation of agriculture and to increase agricultural yield on per unit area. The present day system of agricultural production in our country mainly follows the traditional method — the land is being used to grow crops for the individual family's needs. If a farmer has sufficient paddy in his "gola ghar" to take care of his family's annual needs, he is very happy. A farmer's urge to grow more or maximise economic utilization of the land that he owns, thereby commercialise agriculture, over and above his/his family's needs, hinges on various factors — availability of capital, irrigation facilities, crop-diversification possibility and, above all, natural calamities. While some of the factors like capital, irrigation facilities may perhaps be met, the biggest factor — natural calamities — is beyond man's control, and here in lies the scope to introduce crop insurance schemes.

Our insurance companies, since their inception, barring a few progressive ones, have concentrated on the coverage of traditional risks — fire, marine, and other types of general insurance, as a result such 'safe' risks business resulted in them making super profits which was referred to by the honorable Finance Minister at a discussion meeting held recently.

It is in the same vein I feel, our farmers do have a case, and a strong case indeed. I urge upon the Insurance Association — the apex body of the insurance companies who are operating in the country, to embark upon schemes which will allow the farmers to insure their crops against natural calamities. At the same time, Government might look into the possibility of making a fund available to the insurance companies to support such worthy schemes and the attention is drawn of the honourable Finance Minister. If such a crop insurance scheme could be introduced, not only the farmers will be motivated to grow crops braving the hazards, but also this would lead the way towards commercialisation of agriculture which we so badly need to come out of the travesty of poverty.

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To the