

Barbarians at the Gate?

One cannot but feel for the poor Governor, if one hears about high-profile public efforts by the PM to replace him, what does one expect any self-respecting man to do? For the record, the Governor SBP has done an excellent job in keeping the barbarians from the financial gate!

FACING a very serious economic situation internally and beset by the proximity of one externally, Pakistan must be thankful that the rather creditable efforts of the present government as well as the Governor State Bank of Pakistan, has kept us from going under. Kudos are also in order for former President Farooq Leghari, for if he had lacked courage in sending the Bhutto regime packing in late 1996, we could never have survived Zardarionomics — every pocket in his pocket, every pucker his own — a few more weeks.

In the bad economic environment of Asia, economic survival has taken some doing. We may also thank our lucky stars that George Soros probably considers it beneath his contempt to play around with our meagre foreign resources. As for financial analysts, they are no different than weather pundits, how many eulogizing the so-called 'Asian Tigers' a year ago predicted the Asian financial crisis? Given that economic forecast, particularly with false or unreliable indicators, is risky business, given that the present global electronic environment where flight of capital takes seconds only is hardly predictable, one thing is very predictable, the leaders of Pakistan have to put in a seven-days-a-week, 24-hours-a-day superhuman effort to escape economic apocalypse.

The present 9-to-5 hours-a-day six days-a-week syndrome is hardly conducive to economic amelioration of the masses. Lip-service with flourishes of the ZA Bhutto-type rhetoric will not do, deeds are much more appropriate to the times, as far pragmatic and as much related to the need as possible.

A recent presentation to the PM in Zurich by a group of Pakistani financial experts based in the US (who came all the way to Zurich on their own expense) brilliantly identified the causes of Pakistan's economic woes. They also suggested pragmatic remedial measures. Where they got stumped in was in the implementation of the proposals made, that is our greatest failing, a continuing lack of success in executing plans well laid. And even the plans fall short of being revolutionary, to quote the PM "it will take a revolution, to take us out of this mess". Mr PM, if the situation leads to anarchy, that may well bring about a street revolution by the means of any government to contain.

The PM could well start his 'revolution' by putting his own house in order, by dividing the scope of government work and his time in such a way that concentrated effort is made in both the political and financial fields. That he is not overly impressed with his economic team is abundantly clear in the off-handed manner he has in dealing with the leading members of his financial administration. More specifically, he has stated his lack of confidence publicly enough for the Governor State Bank of Pakistan to hand in his resignation. That would have been a tragedy, no one has done more in keeping monetary support in check than Dr Mohammad Yaqub, for him to walk out now would have meant financial disaster for Pakistan, a loss in confidence in Pakistan's economic revival by the world's financial institution that would have been more shatter-

ing than the loss of investor confidence.

By the weekend, good PML soldier Senator Sartaj Aziz had cajoled the Governor State Bank of Pakistan into staying, for the time-being, at least for the foreseeable future. One cannot but feel for the poor Governor, if one hears about high-profile public efforts by the PM to replace him, what does one expect any self-respecting man to do? For the record, the Governor SBP has done an excellent job in keeping the barbarians from the financial gate!

Far too long Shahbaz Sharif has been receiving public approbation, being tarred and feathered by public perception while the muck has never stayed on his more amiable brother. A far more methodical administrator, Mian Shahbaz Sharif is better organized than his PM brother. Not being very prone to Rasputins, his Achilles' Heel is less vulnerable to exploitation, though one dare say that some retired persons with grudges to assuage because they were stopped in getting higher rank do get time to profess ill advice in his ears about the Armed Forces. Mian Shahbaz has been trouble-shooting for his brother, he should now be given over the political problems to tackle while Mian

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

freeing the PM to do his sworn duty to the electorate, to get us out of this economic morass in exclusion of almost everything else.

Nobody should doubt that the PM is sincere in his stated resolve but what we need is a pragmatic and comprehensive long-term plan, that can only happen if he fully concentrates on the economy. Over the governance year, the government have settled into a routine, a routine which sees Islamabad close down on Saturdays — as the PM heads for Rawind — and open up only Monday morning when he gets back. Nobody denies the PM the lifestyle of a tycoon (which he is) but more importantly he is also the head of an impoverished nation that is living on the borderline of economic disaster. This country could not afford Me Benazir and her foreign jaunts of no consequence, today it can ill-afford even a tycoon PM to be out of the country for more than three days at a time, more than twice in a month.

This cultural environment is suited better to later Moghuls than the horseback reign of the founder Moghul Babar. Even Mian Sahib's symbolic road-making hero, Sher Shah Suri of the GT road fame, ruled from horseback. Laid-back govern-

ment with time-outs in Zurich, London and Hong Kong will not work. Instead of Rawind, Mian Nawaz Sharif should be in the Provincial capitals on Saturday nights, talking to private entrepreneurs in the economic capitals of the country to get the national economic engine working efficiently. He also needs to do this without dragging around his usual retinue of courtiers, a bunch that would put Emperor Akbar and his 'nine jewels' to shame.

His conversations should be confined to very small groups (maximum 10 to 15 including his advisors on the pattern of the Pakistani experts group from the US) that must take in proposed initiatives in the industrial, commercial and services sector on a daily basis. The large crowd (with attentive Governors, Chief Ministers, Ministers and Secretaries) that turns up everywhere to hear long prepared speeches about how good the PM is, how lucky the country is to have him, how bad the economy is and what is going to happen to Pakistan if someone doesn't do something about it, should be avoided as these home-truths are well known.

We need people to make remedial suggestions not proffer advice only on issues which concern their own selfish interests. Mian Sahib must get his priorities right and his concentration together. He must allocate his human resources adequately and delegate authority judiciously. He has a very good understanding of the economy and its problems, he has simply got to get his act together in implementing what must be implemented. He is asking the nation for sacrifice, then he must symbolise that sacrifice by putting in those long hours in effective economic governance. He must not keep repeating *ad nauseam* what he is doing for the nation, he must now tell them how he is going to do about it.

He has to take strong decisions that may well hurt the populace in the short run but Pakistanis are a very resilient bunch and if Mian Sahib can explain to them why the sacrifice is necessary and symbolize that sacrifice by setting austere standards of living, not mere eyewash, then he will find this nation not only willing to make that sacrifice but sacrifice their will to Mian Sahib's to make this country back on economic keel. We have seen what the barbarians have done to East Asia, the barbarians are now at our gate!

INDIAN ELECTIONS

How Far Sonia Factor Favours Congress?

by Zaglul A Chowdhury

The Congress is in a bad shape for last few years and lost power in the last elections by capturing the lowest number of seats in the history of independent India.

CAMPAIGN to the line up of the Indian elections has reached a feverish pitch as the last days of the electioneering are being marked by more acrimony and, in the process, major parties or groups vying for power are sparing no efforts to woo the voters and vilify the rivals. Two main figures who are drawing most crowd are certainly major contenders for power Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s prime ministerial candidate Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Italy-born widow of the former prime minister and Congress president Rajiv Gandhi.

Undoubtedly, Mr Vajpayee is the most charismatic of the present day Indian politicians because of his spell-binding oratory and a clean record as a public figure despite the controversy that surrounds his political party for its communal overtones and excessive reliance on Hindu nationalism in politics. He has been in the thick of the political game for last several decades and adorned such positions including premier, external affairs minister and leader of the opposition.

By stark contrast, Sonia Gandhi formally joined politics only a few months ago and more interestingly, decided to play an active role in the elections only a few weeks ago. She was known to be ambivalent about joining politics and had spurned requests from the party leaders and workers as well as the well wishers in the past to join politics in a bid to fill the vacuum created by the death of her husband by a suicide bomber in the southern Tamil Nadu state in 1991.

While Vajpayee is a seasoned politician of enormous experience coming from the Madhya Pradesh which is considered as the Hindi heartland in India, Sonia is a woman with foreign origin with practically no experience in active field of public life in vast democratic country. Besides, Vajpayee has been projected as the prime minister if his party enables to form the government after the elections and is contesting the elections from Lucknow in the Uttar Pradesh for a seat in the Lok Sabha (Lower house of parliament). Sonia Gandhi is not seeking elections in the coming polls and said-time and again that she has no big political ambitions and what bothers her to jump into the fray of campaign is to protect the secular fabric of India and preserve the traditional values and the public support for a party like the Congress which was earlier led by her husband, slain

mother-in-law Indira Gandhi and grand father-in-law — India's first prime minister Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru.

These conflicting features notwithstanding, two persons are presently the two main figures in the Indian politics and have become the cynosure of all eyes. There is no denying that there are notable politicians in India with long experience like Mr I K Gujral, V P Singh veteran communist leader Jyoti Basu of CPM, Mr Inderjit Gupta of CPI, and the leaders of some regional parties like Mr Laloo Prasad Yadav in Bihar, Ms Jayalalitha and Mr M Karunanidhi in Tamil Nadu, Mr Chandrababu Naidu in Andhra Pradesh who command great respect and also following. Nonetheless, the attraction of the current campaign and speculations in the context of the Indian politics are Mr Vajpayee and Mrs. Sonia Gandhi. There is another divergent feature in the identity of two persons — Vajpayee is a bachelor while Sonia is accompanied in the electioneering by her daughter Priyanka and son Rahul.

Who is drawing more crowd in the meetings? Mr Vajpayee or Mrs Gandhi? Who is helping more their respective parties for a better performance in the polls? These are the questions that are being raised in the political quarters. But what is more talked about is what has been the impact in the Congress after Sonia decided to campaign for the vast political organisation now on the decline and to what extent she is being able to change the scenario for the Congress.

The Congress is in a bad shape for last few years and lost power in the last elections by capturing the lowest number of seats in the history of independent India. Its cup of woes was full when the organisation was more busy in infighting than taking a fresh vow to come back to power after the last elections. The once-popular party was largely alienated from the people, and more particularly from the minorities with whom the Congress had long traditional close relationship to the extent that the Muslims used to be called as 'vote bank' for the Congress. Thanks to former Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao whose policy as the had of the secular Congress party government ran somewhat counter to the known secularism, long pursued by the organisation, and this is largely responsible for making the Muslims disenchanted with the organisation. Particularly, during the crisis centering the destruction of the

historic 'Babri Mosque' in Ayodhya, the federal government under Mr Rao remained inactive when the Hindu zealots demolished the mosque. Even Mr Vajpayee despite being a top BJP leader, enjoys the support of the communal forces, appeared unhappy over the destruction of the mosque but Mr Rao seemed to have allowed the actions against it as his government remained inactive although he came out with sharp reactions against destroying the mosque only after the task was over.

When the mosque was pulled down by frenzied communal activists, a BJP government headed by chief minister Kallayn Singh was in power in Uttar Pradesh where Ayodhya is located. His position in supporting the demolition of the mosque is understandable but the role of the federal government had baffled many and shocked and angered the Muslims. Mr Rao had to pay a price for this when party lost power and later he had also to lose the Congress party presidency. Not surprisingly, the Congress in a bid to regain its secular character and also confidence of the Muslims punished Mr Rao by denying him a nomination for the coming elections. Mr Sitaram Kesri, who took over the reins from Mr Rao lacks charisma and dynamism, and the Congress under his leadership made little headway towards once again capturing the mood of the Indian electorate.

Mr Kesri's decision to withdraw the support from the H D Deve Gowda led United Front government causing the fall of the government is largely seen as to facilitate his own ambitions to become the Prime Minister which he failed. But this sent wrong signals to the people about his leadership and again the calling off the Congress support from the Gujral government of the United Front led to the collapse of the ministry and this too was not kindly taken by the people. This prompted a snap elections for which the electorate were not ready since it came less than half-way through the five-year term.

However, the reasons for the Congress withdrawal this time was more valid as it centered on the allegations of a party of the UF government being involved in the killing of Congress president Rajiv Gandhi.

Under these circumstances, the Congress was fighting the elections with an impression that it would once again cut a



sorry figure in the polls. Many had predicted that its tally from 140 in the last House may come down to less than 100 in the next Lok Sabha. There were only lacklustre politicians and those in the helm were also not seeing each other eye to eye.

This time Sonia could not ignore the calls of party well wishers and jumped into the election fray. She is not contesting elections from her husband's wellknown 'Amethi' constituency in UP, but has not ruled out seeking polls in the future. She is drawing good crowd. There has been new vigour in the near-moribund organisation. The leaders and workers are rallying around her and even the party president Mr Kesri said she is the leader of the party for all practical reasons.

There is no denying that Nehru family draws deep emotions in India although many disapprove family legacies in democracy. Sonia has problems like being a foreigner and also an allegation of corruption in Bofors arms purchase when her late husband was prime minister. Critics say Sonia might have a hand there, since the beneficiaries, reportedly, included an Italian businessman. The BJP and other are using these against her. Sonia says that nothing could be established on the Bofors issue against her or her husband and has challenged the critics on this.

Sonia Gandhi is certainly helping the Congress and this has been acknowledged by respected leftist leader like CPM secretary H S Surjeet. But to what extent the Congress will be benefited by her remains to be seen. Her campaign and involvement will greatly improve party strength in the polls but may not be enough for what the Congress is looking for.

BJP and other critics say Sonia's impact will be marginal but most feel it may be considerable.

Sonia Campaign — Plus and Minus

A N Dar writes from New Delhi

Because of the crowds who throng to her meetings and the enthusiasm they have shown, the argument of Sonia Gandhi having been born outside India has not created much of an impression beyond what the leaders like Bal Thackeray and George Fernandes might say. The question is still being raised but only as an argument. It has not created a wave against her.

THE Congress party cannot help wondering how grateful it must be to Sonia Gandhi for saving it from withering away. If one person can transform the life of a political party it must in this election be Sonia Gandhi. Even those who find themselves politically opposed to her concede that she has saved the Congress from falling apart. If this was the only purpose of Sonia Gandhi in campaigning for the Congress, her work is fulfilled.

Many Congress sympathisers say that she came out in the open much too late to help the party. Sonia of course must have had her reasons for announcing her decision after the elections had been announced. One question being asked is whether she delayed the announcement because she had not decided whether she wanted to be a full-time party worker. Ever since the assassination of her husband she had remained away from active politics. She has now herself cleared the doubts. She has said that she would continue to be active in politics.

She must have been greatly encouraged by the public response in various places in the country. These have surpassed the expectations of the Congress party. She has been drawing crowds that have compared very favourably with the tallest leaders of the other parties. Most of the states she had visited are not run by the Congress party. So there is no question of crowds having been managed for her.

The big question being asked is whether the crowds come just to see her or to offer her their support. And will the numbers that come be turned into votes? Till the results come we have no means of getting an answer. But the crowds have revived the Congress.

The response to Sonia Gandhi has upset the calculations of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which has been doing so well that it already considers itself at the winning post. Without Sonia Gandhi it would have had little doubt to reach the majority which would enable it to form the government. It is still in a hearty state but its

calculations have been upset by Sonia Gandhi. It has to depend now more on its allies and it has to be watchful about the various units of the United Front who, according to its strategists, should not achieve the kind of strength which when combined with the Congress would beat the BJP in numbers. True, the United Front has said that if it fails to reach a majority, it would not join the Congress to form the government. But there can be no certainty about how the various non-BJP outfits would act after the results to hold back the safe iron surge. Any new reasons can be found to find excuses for coming together. The BJP has every reason to feel apprehen-

sive about getting to be too far while being so near.

Because of the crowds who throng to her meetings and the enthusiasm they have shown, the argument of Sonia Gandhi having been born outside India has not created much of an impression beyond what the leaders like Bal Thackeray and George Fernandes might say. The question is still being raised but only as an argument. It has not created a wave against her. Her status as an India bhai (daughter-in-law) has been more or less accepted. The fact that she must read out her speeches has not created a negative impact. Sonia Gandhi has been accepted as an Indian.

She has taken some wise steps as well as made some mistakes. One of the wisest announcements was that she was not for the time being going to run for political office. Those who study her ways think that she would in a future election ask her daughter, Priyanka, to offer herself as a candidate. Her reluctance to stand for election has made her freer as a political campaigner. She is not seen as someone who is asking something for herself. This has added weight to her campaigning. This is one of the most wise statements she has made during the campaign.

One of the most untimely statements was about Bofors. It was her first political statement when she started her campaigning. Her statement on Bofors added a new zest to the election campaign as all other parties felt bound to react to it. It became one of the hot election talking points. But it was of no tactical use to Sonia Gandhi or the Congress. It revived an old controversy. It got no plus points for the Congress Party. In terms of election gains, the Congress party should have left it aside. Sonia Gandhi could have spoken about it if the other parties brought it into focus. A senior leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party told this writer that they had not planned to raise Bofors as a major issue but now that it had been raised, they would not let it go.

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election campaign as all other parties felt bound to react to it. It became one of the hot election talking points. But it was of no tactical use to Sonia Gandhi or the Congress. It revived an old controversy. It got no plus points for the Congress Party. In terms of election gains, the Congress party should have left it aside. Sonia Gandhi could have spoken about it if the other parties brought it into focus. A senior leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party told this writer that they had not planned to raise Bofors as a major issue but now that it had been raised, they would not let it go.

Sonia Gandhi's fortunately received very soft reaction from one of Rajiv Gandhi's fierce later-day enemies, VP Singh, who played down the present Bofors controversy. The man who had mounted one of the largest campaigns against Rajiv Gandhi on Bofors now said that it should not be held against Sonia Gandhi because she could not be blamed for it.

Sonia Gandhi's weakest point could be the ramshackle organisation she is campaigning for. The Congress is an organisation which has its roots in every town and village, in many places quite weak and unpopular but nevertheless widespread. But Sonia has given it a new strength. Every state unit has dissidents working to gain advantage, certainly more mutually fighting than those in the Bharatiya Janata Party and the United Front constituents. This will work against the Congress even if Sonia Gandhi brings in the crowds. Quite clearly Sitaram Kesri is not one of the leaders closest to her. If they come to address a meeting together, it is highlighted not as a routine but as a major new point. Soon after she made known that she would be campaigning for the Congress, the AICC announced three candidates from Delhi. This was before the finalisation of the lists. This was clearly done to show to the cadres that it would be Kesri and not Sonia Gandhi who would be distributing the tickets. A very foolish thing to do to weaken the person who was to be its star campaigner. But this has been cut short because the big crowds who came to cheer Sonia Gandhi gave her a new strength. Sitaram Kesri thought it better to fall in line.

Sonia Gandhi has been told that she should concentrate more on areas where the United Front units are falling part. She can make good headway in the non-saffron areas because the non-BJP votes can be harvested by the Congress. At the time after the polls, the Congress would have to think of weaning some of the BJP allies like Bengegal or Moopanar in Tamil Nadu. That is in case the BJP does too poorly in not reaching the magic figure. But that will much depend on what Sonia Gandhi achieves in the next few days of campaigning.

Twenty-five Years of Bangladesh Constitution

(Continued from 7.02.98)

by M Shah Alam

Fourth Amendment which introduced one-party democracy with presidential form of government concentrated almost all powers in the hands of the President. Concentration for power was believed to be a better mechanism to cope with alarmingly deteriorating economic, social and political conditions. But the extra-ordinary constitutional measures had never any real opportunity to be tested. August 15, 1975, brought everything to a very tragic end.

Subsequent civil-military regimes for long years made all sorts of experiments with the Constitution by way of willful amendment to suit their own purpose, but never dared revoke it. Rather, the incumbents have always tried to give semblance of constitutionality to their rule, attempting thereby to take shelter behind the authority of the original Constitution as a source of moral and legal strength.

A qualitative change in the constitutional development occurred after a popular movement had overthrown General Ershad's Government in December 1990. A fairly free polls under a Caretaker Government and election of a new Parliament created fresh hopes for a

new and healthy constitutional journey. After the return to parliamentary democracy under Twelfth Amendment, the Constitution was restored in substantial parts to its original form. But unfortunately rigged polls again posed a threat undermining the democratic provisions of the Constitution. It necessitated another popular movement to compel the incumbents to hold elections under Caretaker Government. This is now the constitutional provision under the Constitution Thirteenth Amendment.

Most of the change in the Constitution between August 15, 1975, and the time when the Constitution Eight Amendment was passed in the Parliament, were brought forth by martial law proclamations, orders, regulations etc., later embodied in the Fifth and Seventh Amendments passed by parliament. The Eight Amendment of grossly rigged polls. Eighth Amendment was also the work of a parliament produced by rigged polls.

Without going into the questions of substantive merits or demerits of the Fifth and Seventh Amendments, a more fundamental question can be raised as to whether or not it was procedurally legal to

amend the Constitution by martial law orders and then take shelter of amendments adopted by elected Parliament, even if the question of rigged polls is ignored or overlooked. On the other hand, it would perhaps be unrealistic now to raise the question of validity of the procedure and of the acceptability of the parliaments elected by rigged polls. They have perhaps acquired post fact validation by the passage of time. Raising this issue now could do more harm than good to the nation. This reality might lead one to consider the matter as legally settled.

Relying on the doctrine of basic structures as upheld by our Highest Court, some other amendments of the Constitution can also be very legitimately questioned. First amongst them is the declaration of Islam as the state religion of Bangladesh which was made under the Eighth Amendment. Mere declaration of faith in the Almighty Allah, one of the Islamic names for God, as it has been done under the Fifth Amendment, and naming Islam as the state religion under the Eighth Amendment, is not one and the same thing and does not lead to similar legal consequences for other

provisions of the Constitution. Notwithstanding the Fourth and Fifth Amendments, the Constitution remained on the whole democratic and secular in spirit. But the supreme position of Islam in the Constitution as state religion, as it has been done under the Eighth Amendment, has undermined the democratic and secular structure of the Constitution. The spirit of democracy, the principle of equality, the rule of law and secularism are so real and vibrant in our Constitution that declaring any religion as the state religion negates the very creation of the Constitution. It is a negation of the finest achievement of the people's struggle for freedom. Besides having seriously undermined the basic structure of the Constitution, the insertion of Art-2A in the Constitution declaring Islam as the state religion has come into conflict with several other provisions of the Constitution, i.e. Articles 27, 28, 29 and 41. These guarantee some of the most important fundamental rights of the citizens. It is time that state religion part of the Eight Amendment be placed before the Supreme Court for decision on its validity.

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