

India's Instability Tangle

The BJP-led coalition government headed by veteran politician Atal Behari Vajpayee has crumbled in a test of strength. But only by a one-vote margin which does not evidently put the major opposition player Congress in any flood-light of stability either. It is the basically tenuous arithmetic of Indian Lok Sabha's composition rather than incompetence of the BJP-led government tested on any particular issue, domestic or foreign policy, that has brought it down. When Jayalalitha's AIADMK with its 18-member parliamentary group withdrew support from the ruling coalition on Wednesday last the die was cast for the unmaking of Vajpayee government. The question arose whether he was able to provide a viable government after the cleavage opened in the coalition, something that prompted President K R Narayanan to ask the Prime Minister to prove his majority in the parliament. It was significantly a vote of confidence required to be sought and not a no-confidence motion moved by an opposition determined to topple the government on any burning issue. Smaller coalition partners of BJP, especially Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) far from abstaining from the vote which they had promised earlier on actually ended up voting with the opposition. It is the crucial king-making role of the regional and fringe parties to which the major political forces in the country are having to pander that has become a hugely disproportional reality of Indian politics today.

Notably, Vajpayee's government formed on the strength of the BJP being the single largest party in Lok Sabha has met with such a disastrous fate. What guarantee is there for any future coalition led by the Congress which individually does not have the BJP's numerical base in parliament to last the remainder 47 months of the present Lok Sabha? Sonia Gandhi has to choose her allies, like the BJP did, from amongst parties which do not have ideological affinity with the Congress. These smaller parties will ask for concessions to join the Congress in any coalition, so that the latter would have to do some tight-rope walking to retain its position. So, India finds itself in a musical chair of a power game and none can be sure that a snap poll could yield any better results either.

Yet, there is a lesson here for Bangladesh. It is inside the parliament and not outside it that all the mechanics of democracy operated, and operated smoothly in India. Everything happened — ranging from a meeting between Jayalalitha and Sonia and that 'clincher' one between Mayawati and Sonia through horse-trading activities to even voting against party directives — but nothing was allowed to snowball outside the walls of Lok Sabha. Governments in India may be unstable but the system is not. But it is time the Indian electorate pondered over the wisdom of their inconclusive returns.

Who's in Charge?

There is no end to surprises as we read about the happenings in Dhaka University from time to time. The latest one is the very interesting and at the same time intriguing story of ownership of at least one hundred and fifty rooms of ten residential hostels of the university. A revealing report in the popular Bangla daily *Prothom Alo* has elaborately narrated the mechanism by which the student leaders control the allocation of seats to and their use by not only party cadres but outsiders also under the nose of hall authorities. Criminals as well as non-student maastans allegedly live in these rooms with the blessings of ruling party student leaders and purported indulgence from hall provosts and house tutors, in some cases. This tendency of 'room capture', according to the report, started in the late eighties and the culture for harbouring cadres and criminals increased in early nineties and the practice escalated in the mid-nineties as police helped a student organisation to capture the residential halls thereby establishing their absolute authority not only on student politics but on the hall and university authorities when it came to allotment of seats.

This is a dangerous trend set by student organisations fuelled by governments of the day bypassing the lawful authority of the university thereby degrading the powers and functions of the provosts and house tutors. The demand and supply ratio of seats for genuine students is highly disproportionate and the situation is further aggravated by the unauthorised intervention of the student leaders. The outcome will be disastrous if the trend is not arrested immediately. The days may not be far off when the leaders of these student organisations end up controlling far greater number of seats in the dormitories than they are doing at present. Dhaka University authority, autonomous by virtue of 1973 Ordinance, must act now.

Sharjah and After

As cricket's cardinal tournament goes back to the place of its origin, the giants and the minnows wind up their preparatory campaign for the millennium's last World Cup, some in delight while others in despair. At this point of time, if any team can boast of a delightful build-up to the game's premier event, it surely is Pakistan. Sharjah housed their latest courtship with success. To many, the Champions' Cup was Pakistan's even before the triangular series began at the desert venue. Fresh from their comprehensive win in the Pepsi Cup in India, the Pakistanis were odds-on favourite to continue their Sharjah legacy. After the final, when Pakistan captain Wasim Akram held aloft the trophy, few were surprised.

Not long ago, the same team had weltered in endless woes. Match-rigging allegation haunted them wherever they went. Moreover, there had been an apparently endless sequence of failure. Still, Pakistan has fought back and fought back well.

Pakistan's story should be an example for our cricketers, who will, for the first time, rub shoulders with the cricketing elites. There may not have been much to speak of since the momentous success in the ICC Trophy, but the very fact that the local lads have won their place in the ivy league itself is immensely satisfying. The recent debacle in the tri-nation tournament in the capital involving Zimbabwe and Kenya has indeed done a world of harm to the cricketers' morale. Fortune can change at any moment. It has for the Pakistanis. It might for our cricketers, too. No one, not even the most fanatic of fans, expect them to win the World Cup, but everyone wants them to fight with honour.

Emerging Power Struggle in Kremlin

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to find a new helmsman who would steer the course of Russia through choppy waters ahead. For a while he reinstated his former Prime Minister Chernomyrdin but withdrew him in the face of stiff opposition from the Communist dominated Parliament. For the first time, it seemed, the once defiant president capitulated to the Duma. Yeltsin finally accepted his foreign minister, a former spy-master Yevgeny Primakov — a compromise candidate — as his new Prime Minister.

Primakov is a pragmatist trying to make the best of a bad situation. He has already made his marks both on domestic and international front. At home the freefall of the country's economy has been turned into a precipitation in slow motion. For outsiders he carried himself with dignity. The new Prime Minister has emerged as — what newspaper *Izvestia* has commented — 'the substitute president' of the country. In normal circumstances President Yeltsin — left with less than two years of his final term — would have, after the recent disaster, abdicated his presidency owing the responsibility of seething mess and enormous sleaze he himself has created and paved the way for a stable succession, if required, through constitutional amendment.

Instead, Yeltsin, an authoritarian in disposition and megalomania in temperament surprised everyone by vowing to complete his term as president. Not only he wants to serve his full term, Yeltsin, a master manipulator has been trying to influence the succession in favour of his cronies and family members. That has created yet more crises in the politics of succession in Russia.

Seven months after his ap-

pointment as Russia's Prime Minister Primakov has already come under concerted attacks by powerful forces that threaten to shatter the fragile political stability and economic discipline he has helped shape up. The ailing president almost in semiretirement — now jealous of Primakov's growing authority and popularity — appears to have given green signal to a standing criticism of Primakov's government in the electronic and print media controlled by the financial moguls who feel threatened by the Prime Minister's drive to investigate their riches. Mas-

cent time the most austere budget Russia has had since the start of post-market reforms in record time. The prime minister who succeeded in keeping intact his coalition cabinet composed of moderate communists, liberals, regional bosses and technocrats has become the country's leader of day-to-day affairs with President Yeltsin sidelined by his recurrent illness.

Under his leadership the rouble has somewhat stabilised at a new — even if much lower — level against the dollar and the industry is showing signs of growth for the first time in

ruled and amassed huge wealth through a Mafia capitalism for last seven years. The west's stake is still higher. Not only it would like to sustain its market reforms and democratic experimentation in Russia, it also cannot be oblivious of its naggingly problematic client with 22,000 nuclear warheads in its possession.

The Primakov government's failure to reach agreement with the International Monetary Fund over new loan to Russia is however proving the Prime Minister's Achilles' heel. Moscow desperately hopes to secure \$ 4.8bn from the IMF to reimburse its debts to the fund due in May 1999. Unless Primakov government reaches a deal with the IMF before the deadline it will not be able to win agreement from private and sovereign creditors to restructure its other foreign liabilities currently standing at \$ 141 bn. This would force Russia to declare sovereign default as it cannot pay \$ 17.5 bn due to foreign creditors this year. According to analysts, the US has blocked the granting of the IMF loan in the hope of bringing down Primakov who pursues a far too independent foreign policy for Washington's liking. The US' relations with Moscow strained with the selection of Primakov as the country's Prime Minister in September last. The recent stand-off between President Yeltsin and Prime Minister Primakov suspiciously coincided with the hardening of the IMF's stand on loan to Russia.

In spite of the President's disdain for many steps Primakov has taken so far Yeltsin cannot afford to part with him at this difficult juncture for the nation. Following a crucial bargain with the President when Primakov categorically

refused to remove his leftist ministers and threatened to resign, Yeltsin simply backed away. On the other hand, the President, now literally walking the razor's edge, agreed to Primakov's demand to sack Berezovsky as the executive secretary of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). To remove misgivings over reported rift between the President and Prime Minister the President appeared with Primakov on television and assuaged the anxious Russians that Primakov could stay as long as he was the president till 2000.

Despite his victory Primakov does not understandably feel safe. Promises of immunity from dismissal in the past ironically heralded the sacking of Primakov's predecessor by President Yeltsin who just hired and fired his prime ministers rather unceremoniously. Sensing danger from the President, Primakov recently proposed a non-aggression pact among the President, Prime Minister and parliament that would stand guarantee against summary dismissal by Yeltsin without Parliament's approval. But Yeltsin shrewdly preempted the move by asserting that he can limit his constitutional power to dismiss the government.

The emerging power struggle between the President and the Prime Minister clearly shows that Yeltsin refuses to be reconciled to his being sidelined either by his illness or by Primakov. What is not clear is whether Yeltsin just seeks to wrest the limelight out of jealousy or, not withstanding his falling health and failures, he has not given up hopes of prolonging his political life beyond 2000, when his second and last presidential term expires, and therefore perceives Primakov as his rival. If the latter is true Primakov and Russia are in for real trouble.



PERSPECTIVES

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

terminated by Boris Berezovsky, the billionaire linked to the President's daughter Tatyana Diachenko, the campaign labelled the Primakov's cabinet procommunist and antimarket and accused it of incompetence and massive corruption.

But Primakov could not be soft target for his opponents. Even his enemies admit his impeccable credentials as a man of honesty. He has overcome the entrenched hostility between the parliament and Kremlin which put the country on the brink of civil strife in 1993. By inducting communists in this cabinet Primakov has secured the support of a parliamentarian majority whereas the previous governments relied solely on presidential prerogatives. This has enabled Primakov to push through parliament in re-

seven years. He has been able to give a new sense of direction to the Russians despite the continuing economic difficulties. Even the Westerners admit — at least in private — his ability to stop Russia from falling apart — an all too clear syndrome a few months ago. A recent opinion poll showed 56 per cent Russians approving his policy and performance while 90 per cent disapproving Yeltsin's. Given this rating Primakov would be a formidable contender in 2000 presidential election although he persistently denies his candidature.

This is precisely the problem both for President Yeltsin and his western patrons. Both need to have man of their choice in Kremlin. Yeltsin wants it for the impunity of the members of his oligarchy who

Collapse of Vajpayee Government and Possible Implications for Pakistan

by Barrister Harun ur Rashid

Assuming that a Congress-led government comes to power in New Delhi, what could be the implications on Pakistan? There is a view that Pakistan was better off with the Vajpayee government. Why?

A view prevails that the government was doing well after its controversial performance in the past year. The economy of the country bounced back and the budget promised deregulation of the markets which was welcomed by the business sector. On the security issue, it was able to build a minimum credible nuclear deterrence and on the whole the Prime Minister did not expect that his government would fall when one of its largest coalition partners AIADMK withdrew support on 12th April from the government.

The opposition Congress party is jubilant to see the government fall. Now they believe they have a chance to be in power with its leader Italian born-leader Sonia Gandhi, the widow of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. The leader of the House of the opposition Congress party Sharad Power said that they would work for a viable government. He accused the Vajpayee government of being a 'non-performance' which had demoralised the armed forces and was responsible for communal hatred and a feeling of insecurity among

the minorities. A sense of insecurity and the rise of intolerance for minority religions in India were echoed by a Muslim leader Syed Shahabuddin. The Christian leaders were recently alarmed at the attacks made against them by the Hindu extremists. The anti-Christian sentiment was displayed to such an extent that an Australian clergyman with his two minor sons were killed, although the person was engaged in helping the leper patients in Orissa.

The Congress has two options. Either it can form a minority government with the support of other parties in the Parliament or a grand coalition government with more than a dozen parties. The Congress leader Sonia Gandhi will decide on this issue. There is also a view that Sonia Gandhi might not become the Prime Minister and might allow some one else to head the government this time.

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The core issue between India and Pakistan is admittedly the unresolved territorial dispute on Kashmir. The position on Kashmir was so entrenched in India that only a strong or a Hindu nationalist government could take political risks to agree to a compromise to resolve this difficult issue. History tells us that a right-wing government can make a deal on a vexed issue and sell it to the electorate because the public know that the right-wing government cannot compromise the interests of the nation. The Congress government will neither be a strong nor a right-wing government. This being the case, there is a view that there will be no progress on the Kashmir dispute and the relations with Pakistan cannot be moved to a top gear.

Secondly, if there is a Hindu nationalist government based on the principles of *Hindutva* (one religion, one people and one nation) in India, Pakistan's progressive Islamisation of laws and system does not look bad. One could argue that if there

is a Hindu nationalist government in India, why does Pakistan not have an Islamic government with 'pure' Islamic system in the country?

A few observers claim that Pakistan could even argue that the Hindu nationalist government for the rise of the extreme Islamic elements in Pakistan. But if there is a Congress government in New Delhi, such arguments are not likely to cut any ice and Pakistan's proposed introduction of Shariah laws in the country will appear to be an oddity to the outsiders.

Thirdly, there is a view that on defence and security matters, one could hardly see any difference between the Vajpayee government and the Congress party. It was reported that while the Congress government was in power prior to the BJP government, it took a decision in principle to detonate the nuclear devices. After all it was the Congress Prime Minister Indira Gandhi who allowed India to go publicly nuclear in 1974. Again it was the Congress Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru who pursued

stubbornly the Indianisation of Kashmir territory in defiance of the UN Security Council's recommendation of a plebiscite in Kashmir. The Babri Mosque was demolished in 1992 while the Congress was in power.

Finally, the West will appear to be more comfortable with the Congress government in India. This is unlikely to help Pakistan in its international relations.

Conclusion The fact remains that the territory and population of India is larger than the territories and populations of the other six continents or SAARC countries. The region being asymmetrical is further compounded by the Kashmir dispute which led to the ill-will and distrust between India and Pakistan, the key players of the sub-continent. One could argue that by the rules of political mathematics Pakistan's position is unlikely to improve with a Congress government in New Delhi.

However, let us not lapse into pessimism and hope the installation of the Congress government will act as a catalyst in accelerating the process of eliminating tensions between India and Pakistan.

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Vajpayee Gone, Who is Next?

Despite its manifold achievements like the nuclear explosions, bus diplomacy and test firing of the recent Agni II missiles the Vajpayee government collapsed mainly due to its own contradictions and squabbling. A new government in India has to take into account this important factor along with other elements of vulnerability.

enough for the government's survival. The arithmetic of power in a vast democracy like India with myriad of parties particularly the regional ones seeking to call shots these days is really complex. Nonetheless, a close light on the floor of the house was expected and this could have gone either way.

Incidentally, it has gone against the government and Prime Minister Vajpayee has attributed this defeat to the government's lack of commitment by some members. It is possible in such a situation and especially the smaller parties with even three or four members in the 544-member lower house of parliament (Lok Sabha) are now feeling to be on the driver's seats. But it is just no surprise that the government has lost. The last-ditch effort by the BJP, the main constituent of the ruling coalition, in mustering support from some parties fell short of the requirement.

much 'nobler' activity of education. The road to a better life need not be the easier route. Which brings us to the point briefly touched by the author morality and ethics. This again is linked to education. Education also means 'character' and 'personality development' and it begins at the formative stage of every human being, i.e. the early years.

So, shouldn't we be making a start somewhere? And who should be taking the responsibility. A question quite debatable.

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Prime Minister Vajpayee must be feeling crest-fallen but he can derive satisfaction from the fact that this time his government lasted for 13 months — and not 13 days — which is indeed a rather long spell given the nature of instability of Indian politics.

In the fast-changing political situation in India, friends are turning into foes and vice versa. The DMK, headed by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Karunanidhi, had been an active constituent in the anti-BJP platform until the voting took place, but it sided with the BJP government in the confidence motion just because its rival in the state AIADMK chose to part with the government. Few believe that the two rival regional parties would ever be on the same side. The Lokdal in Haryana led by Om Prakash Chautala had very much been an ally of the BJP-led coalition before it broke away only over a month ago and steadfastly remained angry to the BJP but changed mind at the last moment and voted for the coalition. Similarly, political parties are changing their tunes overnight although forces like the leftists are remaining by and large unaltered in political approach while vacillation has become the order of the day. Political expediency and the urge and zeal to extract own share and that too in most cases on own terms from the cake have become the unwelcome tendency in the political pattern in India ever since the rule by a single party has become a mat-

ter of past with no party or group enjoying absolute majority in the house.

Under these circumstances, if the government has lost the motion by a single vote, by the same token will it not be a difficult task if not an Herculean one to form a new government depending on such precarious majority? Moreover, there is no certainty that all those voted against the Vajpayee government will support a new government by Congress of Sonia Gandhi. For instance, the ruling left front in West Bengal was totally against the BJP-led coalition and it is also true that its main constituents the CPI (M) and the CPI have of late shed much of their aversion towards the Congress and expressed readiness to support a Congress-led administration from outside. But smaller allies in the front like the Forward Bloc or the RSP have still reservation about Congress and their handful of votes in the Lok Sabha could create problems. However, bigger allies are trying to change their mind.

It is alarming that neither side could muster support of magic number 272 in the Lok Sabha which would have given a side absolute majority. It is clear that some members chose to remain absent from voting. This went against the Vajpayee government but may also prove disadvantageous to the new government. Although the new government does not need to prove its majority in the house immediately but the president of the country has to be

convinced about the majority support before he invites any party or group to form new government.

The importance of one or two votes has become unbelievably crucial in current political behaviour. Moments before the trust vote was to begin, Loksabha went into an hour-long turmoil over one vote which eventually decided the fate of the Vajpayee government, ruling and opposition members animatedly wrangling over whether Congress member and Orissa Chief Minister Giridhar Gomango had the right to cast his vote on the confidence motion. In the Lok Sabha since he has now moved to a state (Orissa) and dealing with the state assembly there. But the demand of Congress that he can cast the vote because he has not been replaced in the federal parliament through any by-election till now was upheld and this vote turned out to be critically decisive for the opposition. As such, even one vote has now too much weight and many members or parties are now seeking to bargain with the new administration in lieu of the support.

The centrist secular parties which are broadly covered by the United Front or the newly-launched *Rastriya Loktrantik Morcha* led by former Defence Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav in Uttar Pradesh and former Bihar Chief Minister Laloo Prasad Yadav are not very favourably disposed to the Congress for formation of a new government. They still feel that a 'third force' comprising the non-Congress parties should take over to replace the 'communal' BJP-led government with Congress support from outside. But this can not be accepted by the Congress which is the second largest party in par-

liament after the BJP while the strength of the centrist is much less. Besides, Congress itself had supported governments made by the centrist and the leftists in the past when H. D. Deve Gowda and I. K. Gujral were the prime ministers. So, a Congress led government appears inevitable whether it is a coalition or from outside support.

A key figure in the entire scenario is Jayalalitha who precipitated the crisis that has brought down the Vajpayee government. It remains to be seen how she bargains with Congress President Sonia Gandhi on these issues now that she has emerged as the giant-killer. However, since the government is gone, the quest for all opposition parties will obviously be to form a new administration despite their differences in many areas. They are alert that failure to this at this stage will only invite public anger against them as squabbling against the Vajpayee government from power will certainly not be liked.

The governments in India are not lasting long in recent times. The Congress, which has ruled the country for 45 of the independent India's 51 years, is now again in the position of ascendancy. But this position is plagued with manifold problems. For the time being a Congress-led government may be installed but it will be experiencing fragility soon since it has to depend on huge number of non-Congress members to remain in power. This may lead to snap elections as the ultimate solution of the present instability. But a new government will be liked at the moment by Indian electorate who do not want fresh elections so soon. The Vajpayee government despite its manifold achievements like the nuclear explosions, bus diplomacy and test firing of the recent Agni II missiles collapsed mainly due to its own contradictions and squabbling. A new government in India has to take into account this important factor along with other elements of vulnerability.