

LETTER FROM AMERICA

Netanyahu's Ouster by Ehud Barak Bodes Well for Middle East Peace

Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

There is hope for peace in the Middle East because the Israelis eventually found Netanyahu too arrogant for their taste. The chance for lasting peace took a turn for the better when the Israelis, like the rest of the world, also realized that Netanyahu is anti-peace, and threw him out of office!

LET us contrast the persona and politics of former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the newly elected Ehud Barak. After squeaking by and beating Shimon Peres by merely 30,000 votes (less than 1%) in 1996, Netanyahu claimed that he had won a mandate from the Israeli people to alter Oslo, and assembling a right-wing coalition, went about dismantling Oslo. After whipping Netanyahu by 12 per cent (56 to 44%), Barak did not claim any mandate, formed a very broad-based coalition that includes West Bank settlers, religious parties, as well as those who hate the religious parties, and promised to seek peace ASAP.

Mindful of the much-discussed September, 1993 White House lawn ceremony, in which the then Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin hesitated momentarily before grabbing Yasir Arafat's outstretched hand, Netanyahu choreographed his first handshake with Arafat meticulously. Condescending, non-smiling and stern, Netanyahu barely touched the tip of Arafat's fingers for the benefit of the cameras. Netanyahu should not have bothered with such elaborate charade. Whenever he is in the neighbourhood, one can detect arrogance from a mile off. Asked about the peace process, Netanyahu had replied, "I have not been elected Prime Minister of the Palestinians!" In their first meeting, Barak aided an ailing Arafat climb down the steps, put his arm around Arafat's shoulder and afterwards reminded everyone that Arafat is the leader of the Palestinians, "he is not a Zionist or a member of B'nai B'rith".

Netanyahu grew up in America, went to school in Cheltenham in the suburb of Philadelphia, 45 miles from here, and went to college in MIT. He speaks English with a pronounced American accent, and is more interested in sound bites than substance. Barak also went to a very prestigious American university, Stanford, but speaks English with an Israeli accent, and is a man of substance. Netanyahu suffers from "American-Israeli" syndrome. Most of the militant Jewish settlers, including the mass murderer of Palestinians at Fajr prayer at the Ibrahim mosque at Hebron during Ramadan in 1994, Baruch Goldstein, are of American origin. As is the American physician Mordechai, who finances all the controversial settlement activities in East Jerusalem and the territories. These, and others like former Defense Minister

Moshe Arens and New York Times columnist A. M. Rosen, that believe that it is in America's interest, indeed America's duty to protect and promote Israeli intransigence. Israeli leaders born and brought up in Israel on the other hand, such as Yitzhak Rabin and Ehud Barak, are far more down to earth and seekers of peace.

Over and over, Netanyahu's arrogance was his hallmark. The writer remembers him as the glib-talking Israeli representative to the United Nations in the 1980s. In the Sunday morning talk shows, he would raise the viewers' blood pressure by the manner in which he would ridicule and dismiss out of hand the view points of the representative of Arab governments and the Palestinians. In 1987, to raise some political capital at home, he resigned from his post. Incidentally protesting "unfair US policy towards Israel", he was elected to Israeli spy Jonathan Pollard's conviction? Then during the Gulf War when he was the Deputy Foreign Minister of Israel, on CNN he addressed King Hussein of Jordan: "Hussein (not King Hussein or Your Majesty but simply 'Hussein'), stay out of it (the war)!" Fortunately for Middle East peace, Netanyahu was too smart for his own good. He forgot that no Israeli Prime Minister can be elected if his relationship with the American President is strained. Ordinary Israelis know who butters their toast. Like his Likud predecessor Yitzhak Shamir (whom President George Bush could not stand) in 1992, Netanyahu committed electoral suicide by taking on the President of the United States, Bill Clinton.

Ordinary-looking Barak is no saint. President Clinton's political strategist James Carville, who managed Ehud Barak's media campaign during his election, jumped back in horror when he shook Barak's hand for the first time. "The hands of a killer!" he would say later. Indeed, Barak was a killer. Dressed as a woman, he killed Palestinian guerrillas in Beirut. In 1972, dressed as a mechanic, he stormed the plane that the Japanese Red Army had hijacked to Tel Aviv, killing the terrorists. (Such bravery is the reason why Barak is the most decorated soldier in the history of Israel.) To be fair, Barak could say the same about Yasir Arafat's terrorist past.

Netanyahu had his diehard supporters in America, like A. M. Rosen of the New York Times, right to the end. Almost everyone gave Netanyahu the benefit of doubt in the beginning. On his first visit to the US after the 1996 election,

although he played hard ball and reiterated his hard line positions, people gave him ample room for manoeuvre. I remember moderate commentators like Tom Friedman, also of the New York Times, saying that Netanyahu had to put on a tough-guy face in America, before making hard concession at home. Of course, the concessions never came. Netanyahu would sign a deal and swim towards a compromise. As soon as the right-wingers in his cabinet threatened dire consequences, he would swim the opposite way. This in spite of the fact that the overwhelming majority of the Israelis wanted peace with the Palestinians. As Syrian President Hafez al-Assad would say, "Netanyahu was a waste of time!"

Assad feels quite differently about Barak. Ever since Ehud Barak's victory, Barak and Assad have been outcomplicating each other. This bodes well for peace between Syria and Israel. Before he passes from the scene or hands over to his son, Assad would like nothing better than to get the Golan Heights back. Barak would like nothing better than to neutralize the only remaining adversary that could threaten Israel militarily, even if that means giving back the Golan. If that were to be accomplished, Barak could happily withdraw forces from southern Lebanon (he has promised to do so within a year), which has turned into Israeli Vietnam. Syria, after all, is Lebanon's real government.

Mr Barak said recently: "Syria has 700 airplanes, 4000 tanks, 2500 artillery pieces and surface-to-air missiles that are neatly organized and can cover a whole country with nerve gas. The Palestinians are the weakest of our adversaries. As a military threat to Israel, they are ludicrous." In short, Syria has military power, the Palestinians have none. That is not good news for the Palestinians. What they get is up to the goodwill and generosity of Ehud Barak.

It will take enormous goodwill on Israel's part to overcome the differences with the Palestinians. Palestinians want an integrated, contiguous state whose citizens may move freely within. The Israeli idea of a Palestinian state is Palestinian enclaves surrounded by Israeli army. Palestinians and Arabs want sovereignty over East Jerusalem and the Islamic holy sites in the Old City; the Israelis would only agree to a Palestinian capital in the adjoining West Bank village of Abu Dis. Palestinians insist that there can be no peace until the Palestinian refugees return

to their former home in Israel. Mr. Barak insists that no refugee can ever come back to the now Jewish state. One hopes that during Barak's visit to America last week, President Clinton reminded the Israeli Prime Minister that wringing every concession out of Yasir Arafat will give Israel temporary victory, but not permanent peace. Israel will find out in the West Bank what India is finding out in Kashmir, that you cannot pretend to be a true democracy and keep by force people who do not want to be a part of you.

Netanyahu's strategy was to play along with the peace process and when time came for keeping his end of the bargain, bludgeoned the Palestinians for noncompliance and do nothing! After a while, the game was up, and no one believed a word Netanyahu said. On a visit to America last year, the Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel was not invited to the White House! After his election defeat in May, Tom Friedman bluntly called Netanyahu a "bad man."

President Clinton was so ecstatic about Barak's US visit that he said "he felt like a kid with a new toy." Later, Clinton had to frantically explain to suspicious Israeli reporters that it was a figure of speech; he did not mean to say that Barak was his new toy! Actually, Barak is his own man, who likes to keep his cards very close to his chest. It will be said if Barak were to act like world cup winning US women football team's Brandi Chastain, who after scoring the fifth US goal in the final penalty shootout, took off her jersey in excitement, and revealed a non-flattering chest!

Last year on a visit to America, Ehud Barak was on New York late night television's Charlie Rose show. I remember how he assailed Netanyahu. He categorized Netanyahu's contention that withdrawal of additional 13 per cent from West Bank as demanded by the Wye accord would imperil Israel's security, as nonsense. As Israel's one time security chief he knows that, Barak said. Time to deliver, Ehud!

As Allah (SWT) says in the holy Quran, if your enemy inclines towards peace, so should you. Peace-makers take on an aura of holiness and deserve everyone's support. I believe that there is hope for peace in the Middle East because the Israelis eventually found Netanyahu too arrogant for their taste. The chance for lasting peace took a turn for the better when the Israelis, like the rest of the world, also realized that Netanyahu is anti-peace, and threw him out of office!

Liberation and Beyond by J N Dixit

(The Daily Star is serialising extracts from the book through exclusive contract with University Press Limited (UPL), publisher of its Bangladesh edition).

1974: The Fragmentation of Bangladeshi Politics

ALL those who were convicted or detained under the Bangladesh Government's anti-Pakistani "Collaborator's Order" of 1972 were released by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on December 16, 1973. This was the final act of impulsive generosity in which Mujib indulged with the hope of ensuring national reconciliation. The ban on communal parties like Jamaat-e-Islami and the Muslim League remained pro-forma, but no drastic action was taken against their political and socio-religious activities. Top leaders of these organisations like Salwar Khan and Khwaja Khairuddin who were released on December 16, 1973 became active again. The consequence was that the representatives of these communal elements and pro-Pakistani parties were elected in the Gram Parishad and town municipality elections held in January, 1974.

Apart from pro-Pakistani individuals getting inducted into the Bangladeshi armed forces and civil services, such elements re-entered Bangladesh politics at the grassroots level in these local self-governing bodies. As stated earlier, Mujibur Rahman had agreed to the release of all Pakistani prisoners of war and not to hold war crime trials. Allowing former pro-Pakistani elements to re-enter Bangladesh politics was another gesture, the objective of which was to expedite Pakistani recognition of Bangladesh and facilitate Bangladesh's entry into the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). Though more than a hundred countries had recognised Bangladesh by the end of 1973, Mujibur Rahman and the political elite of Bangladesh still felt that until Pakistan gave Bangladesh formal recognition, Bangladesh's de jure existence as an independent and sovereign state will somehow remain in doubt. Mujib had already conveyed messages through back channels to Bhutto that he was keen on Pakistani recognition and on joining the Organisation of Islamic Conference.

A seven-member delegation from the OIC visited Dhaka on February 21, 1974 to extend a formal invitation to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to participate in the OIC summit in Lahore on February 27. The delegation brought a message from Bhutto that he would formally declare Pakistan's recognition of Bangladesh at the summit.

Mujibur Rahman accompanied by Dr Kamal Hussain participated in the Lahore summit of the OIC. Being anxious to be part of the ideological mainstream of the Islamic countries, Mujib made policy statements emphasising Bangladesh's Islamic identity and its commitment to be an effective member of the OIC. Bhutto gave formal Pakistani recognition to Bangladesh on February 24, 1974. The premier English newspaper of



From right to left: High Commissioner Subimal Dutt, Mrs. Dixit, the author and the Bangladesh Vice President, Nazrul Islam, at a High Commission reception, August 1972.

Dhaka, The Bangladesh Observer welcomed the recognition editorially stating that the "Pakistani recognition unquestionably consolidates the status of Bangladesh as an independent, sovereign State." This was a view generally shared by the emerging political elite in Bangladesh, resulting from the new political orientations which Mujib was giving to domestic political processes.

China's recognition followed. There were, however, some sections in Bangladesh public opinion, inside the country and abroad, who thought that Pakistani recognition would undermine the ideological integrity of Bangladesh. A newsletter of Bangladeshis published in London, Bangladesh Newsletter, in its issue of the last week of February 1974 reflected this view when it stated that the first and inevitable consequence of Pakistani recognition would be to open the floodgates of religious communal revivalism. The same newsletter reflected on Mujib's motivations and went on to say, "we expect some of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's bitterest opponents to change their colours and turn themselves overnight into his allies and staunch supporters now that Pakistan has recognised Bangladesh." The fact of the matter, as events showed in the remaining part of 1974, was that the anti-liberation forces in Bangladesh drew strength from Pakistani recognition and became more effective as an opposition in Bangladeshi politics.

Mujibur Rahman became unwell a fortnight after participating in the OIC summit, and decided to proceed to Moscow for treatment on March 10. Earlier in 1973, he had gone for medical treatment to Britain and Switzerland for a gall bladder operation. The Moscow trip was to receive the much needed treat-

ment for chronic bronchitis from which he suffered which was compounded by overstrain. Opposition elements in Bangladesh used both these medical visits as a handle to tarnish his image. Had he gone for treatment with just his wife and a small entourage, this opportunity would not have been available to his critics. But he travelled with a large entourage and stayed in costly hotels. A large number of Bangladeshi entrepreneurs from Dhaka as well as from Western Europe reportedly utilised these visits to establish contacts with senior officials accompanying Sheikh Mujib. They also managed to make business deals which, according to the Opposition, were not entirely above board. These allegations were bruited about by Opposition political groups as well as in certain sections of Bangladeshi media, adversely affecting Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's and his government's image. Mujib stopped over in Delhi on April 10 and 11, 1974 on his way back from Moscow where he formally endorsed the tripartite agreement signed between India, Bangladesh and Pakistan about the repatriation of prisoners of war and not holding war crime trials. As a follow up of this, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman paid a five-day visit to India between May 12 and 17, 1974. A joint declaration was issued on the occasion on May 16 which embodied several concrete decisions enhancing the content and expanding the range of Indo-Bangladesh relations. In fact, the May 1974 visit was the most substantive in terms of results after Mrs Indira Gandhi's trip to Dhaka in March 1972. It would be pertinent to mention the joint decisions arrived at during Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's visit to New Delhi.

It was agreed that India and Bangladesh would cooperate to strengthen the jute industry in Bangladesh in the fields of production, trade, technical development and manufacture.

Taking into account Bangladesh's concern about the adverse impact on its economy of the illegal trade and smuggling between the two countries, India agreed to set up a joint committee at the ministerial level to introduce preventive measures.

India agreed to redress the adverse balance of trade which Bangladesh suffered from bilateral trade transactions since 1972.

India also agreed to help Bangladesh set up four industrial projects. One was a cement plant at Chatak based on limestone to be exported from India. The second was a clinker plant in Meghalaya for exclusive supply of clinker to Bangladesh. The third project was establishment of a fertilizer plant in Bangladesh for the supply of urea to India for which the latter would pay at normal international prices. The last was setting up of a sponge iron plant in Bangladesh based on iron ore from India.

India also agreed to provide credits to Bangladesh on a low-interest, long-term payment basis to finance the Indian equipment and services for these projects. An initial outlay of Rs 38 to 40 crore was made by India to finance these projects.

An agreement was reached to carry out a feasibility study for a rail link between Calcutta and Agartala via Chandpur and Akhnoor in Bangladesh. Agreement was also reached on the demarcation of the remaining portions of the Indo-Bangladesh border under which the southern half of South Barisal was to remain with India in return for which India would cede Dahagram and Angapota enclaves to Bangladesh.

The only issue on which no agreement could be reached was the sharing of Ganga waters below the Farakka. Khondakar Mushtaq Ahmed, though Minister for Commerce and Foreign Trade, was opposed to any practical solution based on actual quantities of water available during the lean season. He had the active, extremist support of BM Abbas, Adviser to the Prime Minister on Water resources. Both members of Mujib's delegation, the result of any interim quantification of waters to be shared between the two countries, in fact, they even opposed a general formulation which stipulated that the flow of the Ganga in the lean months would have to be augmented to meet the requirements of the two sides. Mujib had to overrule them. In fact, finalisation of the Joint Declaration was delayed by nearly two hours due to the obstructionist tactics of Khondakar Mushtaq Ahmed and BM Abbas.

I recall that this was the last meeting between Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Indira Gandhi which produced any concrete results. Indo-Bangladesh relations began to proceed along a downside by the autumn of 1974. Significant events between May and August, 1974 which influenced Indo-Bangladesh relations were President VV Giri's visit to Dhaka from June 15 to 19, and the visit of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to Dhaka in the last week of June 1974. Mr Giri's visit was the first by a President from India to Bangladesh after its liberation. It was essentially a ceremonial event but was not devoid of some theatrics. Mrs Giri was a strict vegetarian. Therefore the Presidential staff of India indicated that her food would have to be cooked in a separate kitchen where meat is not cooked, using utensils in which meat had never been placed. The Bangladesh Government was the very embodiment of hospitality. It built an annexe to the kitchen at Bangabhaban (President's House). Utensils and some particular types of vegetables were flown in from Calcutta. An entire wing of Bangabhaban was cleared and renovated for the stay of President Giri and his party. He did not want to be confined to the residence of the President. He wanted to see the scenic beauty in Bangladesh. It was therefore decided to fly him out to Rangamati, in the Chittagong Hills Tracts. The place was of additional significance to the Indian High Commission because India's first High Commissioner, Subimal Dutt, had commenced his ICS career in pre-partition days at Rangamati as a district officer. I still recall a large wooden table on the first floor of the Government Guest House at Rangamati which had, inscribed on it, the names of all district officers of Rangamati who had served since the beginning of this century. The period of Dutt's service was somewhere around late 1920s or early 1930s.

(Continued)

The Intrigues of Half-baked Information

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

RIGHT at this moment I cannot recollect where and to what context did I come across the expression "the unkindest cut of all". But I could not help reproducing it to-day in particular reference to the part of the statement attributed to BNP Chairperson in her July 5, 1999 public meeting at the Paltan Maidan. Castigating the present government for its colossal failure in all the aspects of our economic, political and social life, she turned to the item of MIG-29 purchase for our Air Force. She didn't say that MIG-29 was bad for us but expressed her deep concern telling her listeners that those kites would have to be grounded as mere show piece because, she feared that India might refuse selling spare parts. We appreciate her natural anxiety which behoves the leader of the opposition and a future Prime Minister! But, when she said that such show piece would be on display at Tongipara it sounded utterly outrageous. So, she seems to derive devilish pleasure in making such a sarcastic remark on the father of the nation and on his eternal resting place.

However, on a closer look at the subject vis-a-vis her uncalled for induction of the "India bogey" it transpires that she was only half-informed! This can be firmly corroborated from the 3-hour long interview of the Air Chief, Jamaluddin Ahmed as published in The Daily Star on July 5, 1999. Air Vice Marshal gave a vivid and chronological clarification leading to the MIG-29 deal. At one place he spoke of the spares that would be required after a stipulated hours of flying. He mentioned that two different Russian manufacturers of spares for MIG-29, now merged into one, would provide the spares on cash payment at any time. As such, no Indian manu-

facturer/dealer will have any involvement and hence there is no reason why should we be dependent upon India. Invariably, therefore, Begum Zia's contention was untrue and clearly misleading. If still she insists that she is right then she should be obliged to tell us that Air Vice Marshal Jamaluddin Ahmed was wrong.

Her wishful imagination consigning the planes to Tongipara as show piece shall remain agonizingly obtrusive. Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad gave his reaction on July 7, 1999 reminding Begum Khaleda Zia that there was no airport at Tongipara. To land MIG-29! Tinged though with a bit of humour the elderly politician couldn't perhaps struggle for a better expression to condemn such hysterical outburst of the leader of the opposition. Finance Minister SAMS Kibria, turning down the allegation in some quarters about possible kickbacks in the MIG-29 procurement deal, said that there is no scope for such an underhand maneuver because it is between two governments and that private businessmen are not in any way involved in it. Perhaps, that's how Begum Zia didn't mention about kickbacks.

Parallel to MIG-29 deal we have another item on the agenda of public criticism. This is about the India made Ashok Leyland trucks to be procured for our Army. From ISPR we know that one of these trucks was put on test by our Army to determine its efficiency. This was reportedly done with the concurrence of former Army Chief General Mahubur Rahman. The controversial remarks given by him about the utility and use-worthiness of such type of vehicles in our Army have been taken care of by the Indian High Commission

in Dhaka. Besides rejecting the remarks on the efficiency of these vehicles, India High Commission refuted the claim that these types of vehicles were not in use by the Indian Army themselves. The IHC tells that the Indian Army use these vehicles and that a big number was yet to be delivered by the manufacturers. In spite of all these the Prime Minister decided that fresh tenders be floated. This puts an end to the present controversy around Ashok-Leyland trucks. Evidently, the Prime Minister has her oft-quoted principle of transparency on the back of her mind. Hopefully, her decision to reverse the almost finalized deal doesn't eventually become costly for the public exchequer. There are enough precedences when second bids went to bigger advantage of the bidders. Such situations will call for maximum caution before any decision is taken.

And yet we have currently intriguing phenomenon in which the position and the opposition have been hijacked. For quite some time a sinister propaganda has been charging the air that the Awami League government of Sheikh Hasina was contemplating of abolishing Madrasah education from Bangladesh. On the contrary, the government, over the past three years in office have refuted such wild publicity in unambiguous terms. But the propagators appear to be still on their toes to incite the religious sentiments of the Muslims eventually to create disaffection among the huge number of teachers and students pursuing Madrasah education. It transpires now that the vicious propaganda has again been based on incomplete information.

The Education Minister told the Jatiya Sangsad that the to-

tal number of Madrasahs included in the MPO framework was 6847, out of which administrative action on specific grounds of default has been taken against only 251. From these 251, madrasahs, registration of 126 has been kept in abeyance till some gross irregularities are investigated into, and temporary suspension order has been given to the remaining 125. Mr Sadeque informed the House further that there were 1 lakh 26 thousand and 58 teachers and employees in 6847 madrasahs and out of which government grant in respect of 1047 only has been stayed.

The Education Minister added that for the improvement of the madrasahs enlisted in the MPO, in 1995-96 financial year 204 crore taka was spent but last year the allocation was raised to 329 crore taka. He claimed that such figures would bear ample testimony of the good intention of the present government to support madrasah system of education without any discrimination. He informed that many of the aforementioned 251 institutions didn't have adequate number of teachers, some didn't have any fund and yet the standard of education in some was below the minimum acceptable standard. These were taken against some of these madrasahs for corrupt practices. So, unless they fulfilled the conditions that enabled others enjoy MPO facilities, the government was unable to patronise them from the public exchequer, he finally opined. BNP legislators raising the point didn't pursue it further.

These are few examples of inadequate information, on which the opposition legislators and other leaders are found to have acted obviously in order to leg pull the government.

By Honna-Barbera

