

Vajpayee Strikes a Delicate Balance

Indian Prime Minister's nationalism is confusing not only to many Indians, but also to outsiders, says

M Abdul Hafiz

BY the time Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee took oath on 13 October 1999 for the third time as India's Prime Minister his liberal credentials were established in the vast multitude of Indians. Earlier his moderate personal image contributed a great deal toward forging a grand alliance of 24 parties, called the NDA, with BJP at the helm and its triumphal return to power ensuring the party's steady ascent in India's political firmament.

More than that Mr Vajpayee, if not his party, emerged as the best choice of the Indians to lead India for next five years. He carefully distanced himself from the party's hawks when in 1992 the BJP headed by L K Advani, an embittered Hindu militant aroused a Hindu mob to pull down four century-old Babri Mosque in the temple city of Ayodhya in North India. An apparently disturbed Vajpayee called it a 'national shame'.

Since then Vajpayee has been trying to give BJP the hold independent of Sangh Parivar of which BJP was only a political front. By now it is believed that he has sufficiently purged the militant Hindu nationalists from the party's inner circle and rehabilitated the liberals in their place. The BJP during his third term as prime minister gives the look of a still more liberal formation with avowed secularists like Sharad Yadav

and Chandrababu Naidu joining or supporting the NDA. The genesis of Vajpayee's liberalisation process could be found as early as in 1996 when his first government fell only after 13 days. After a period of penance and introspection he desperately tried to widen BJP's constituency by putting on a moderate face acceptable to voters disenchanted with Congress but core still firm believes in Gandhian secularism and communal harmony. During his second term he inducted Jaswant Singh, a moderate in the cabinet at his external affairs minister.

Although Vajpayee ordered Pokhran to make India a nuclear power which had long been on the agenda of the party he tried to assuage global anxiety by undertaking a peace mission to Pakistan. Brushing aside the extremists' suggestion to travel to Pakistan in a battle tank he held out olive branch to Pakistan by traveling to Lahore in the inaugural bus service between India and Pakistan. He made it a point to visit Minar-i-Pakistan in Lahore to put an end to the misgivings of the many about his vision of an 'Akhand Bharat'. He also fought off the demands of Indian hard liners for an invasion of Pakistan when the Pakistani intruders slipped across the LoC in Kashmir.

After the debacle of his 13-

day government in 1996 Vajpayee jettisoned the party's most inflammatory anti-Muslim stands. He abandoned any mention of a plan to build a temple dedicated to Ram at the site of demolished Babri Mosque. He dropped calls to abolish autonomy in the Muslim state of Jammu and Kashmir and stopped its demand for uniform civil code. Vajpayee, after the alienation of the country's Christian community, now plans to welcome Pope John Paul II in Delhi this month despite the hardliners' complaints that a grand mass arranged in Pope's honour would clash with the sanctity of Diwali celebration at that time.

The Hindu ultranationalists seem to have been adequately tamed by Vajpayee. The prime minister now seems to be drawing less and less strength from the RSS, which has long been the party's wellspring. After a period of dithering Vajpayee, in one of the BJP conferences even condemned attacks on the Christians in Gujarat. He asked the government in Uttar Pradesh to rescind an order making Saraswati Vaidana compulsory in all educational institutions.

Yet suspicion persists both in secular camp and among India's minorities. Many Indians believe that the recent wave of violence against the country's Christian community across the country was the

works of Hindu militants. Although Vajpayee never encouraged the militant elements, he also did not turn on those culprits. Vajpayee flirted with the RSS philosophy and its brand of aggressive Hindu nationalism during his earlier days as a staunch member of RSS. Later he might have come out of RSS inner orbit and understood the futility and danger of the pursuit of its agenda in Indian context, but he never publicly renounced the outfit or his connection with it.

The enigma about his persona thickens when he still says that is 'no question' of distinguishing himself from militant BJP leaders. Advani, the architect of Ayodhya siege is his de facto number two. Vajpayee's complex nationalism is confusing not only to many Indians but also to the outsiders.

Contrary to the expectation that Mr Vajpayee, after coming to power, would clip the wings of RSS zealots the organisation has become stronger than ever. Thrice banned after its founding in 1925, the RSS knew that they were heading nowhere without political power. So, with more than 10 million adherents nationwide including 1 million hardcore activists the RSS had mobilised voters for BJP in past elections. How can Vajpayee or his party stop the excess of RSS committed against the minorities without

jeopardising the party's crucial support base? In a recent Human Rights Watch report on anti-Christian violence, the RSS and its offshoots such as the Bajrang Dal, a militant youth group spawned by the RSS during the 1980s, are cited as the 'most responsible'.

Vajpayee is directly challenged by the hardliners when Murl Monohar Joshi the BJP's HRD minister recently made declaration about the resumption of his Indianisation of education programme by rewriting the syllabi to project ancient India's Hindu glory. The BJP chief minister for Uttar Pradesh, Kalyan Singh warned during his election speech that no power on earth can prevent the construction of Ram Temple in Ayodhya. In fact devout Hindus have already tired master craftsmen to carve the stone work for a new temple.

Vajpayee's paradoxes are understandable. He cannot survive in power only on the strength of BJP supported by the Sangh Parivar. At the same time he cannot afford to abandon them altogether. He has to keep happy the party's extremists group while during additional strength from outside to keep his boat floating. Putting on a liberal face it is difficult to make a dent on the wavering segment of the society.

The author is a retired Brigadier of Bangladesh Army.

Nepal Prepares for Summit

Since no member-state has so far requested the host country to postpone the Saarc summit, Nepal is going ahead with preparations for the event, Deepak Gajurel writes from Kathmandu

HOSTS Nepal are very hopeful of holding the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (Saarc) summit as scheduled from November 26 to 28 in Kathmandu despite media speculation it may be postponed in view of the political developments in Pakistan.

Nepali Foreign Minister Ram Sharan Mahat said Pakistan had confirmed its participation in the summit. But a formal announcement on the summit is yet to be made.

"The date of the event will be formally announced after our Foreign Minister's visit to Bhutan," Foreign Secretary Murali Raj Sharma said. Mahat is due to visit Bhutan to extend the invitation for the summit to King Jigme Singye Wangchuck. Such invitations have already been extended to the heads of state and government of the other five member-nations.

The seven-member Saarc grouping is composed of Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

Speculation had been rife that the summit may be postponed because of the developments in Pakistan. These were given currency by a section of the Nepali press. The English-language Kathmandu Post quoted "a highly placed government official" as saying, "India is nudging smaller countries in the region to speak against holding the summit because of the political upheaval in Pakistan."

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the host country to postpone the summit, Nepal is going ahead with preparations for the event.

Though Pakistan's participation in the summit is confirmed, all eyes are on who will represent the country because of the confusion regarding the constitutional status of the Chief Executive, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, and President Rafiq Tarar.

Most Saarc nations had frowned at the military coup staged by Musharraf against the civilian government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. The fact that there was no felicitation or congratulatory to the military ruler from any of the Saarc nations is a symbolic disapproval to the new rule in Pakistan," said Nepal Council of World Affairs chairman Panna Kaji Amatya.

No matter who represents Pakistan, Nepal has booked hotel rooms for the dignitaries to the summit. "Millions of rupees have already been spent on renovating infrastructure," Mahat said, adding, "we have our own obligations to hold the event on time."

Foreign Ministry officials are certain that the summit would take place as scheduled. "I don't think the summit would be postponed at the eleventh hour," Foreign Secretary Sharma said. "As only about three weeks are left for the event, we are not expecting any request for postponement," he added.

-India Abroad News Service

Nature's Fury

Shattered Orissa residents fail to come to terms with calamity. Saroj Mishra writes from Bhubaneswar, India

KANCHAN Samal's world has turned topsy-turvy in the last 72 hours. Homeless and with an ailing husband in tow, she has been taking shelter in the garage of a multi-storey apartment complex since October 29 when a ferocious supercyclone hit the eastern coastal state of Orissa. "Our thatched house was blown away. Worse, a tree fell on our compound, burying all our belongings. We were poor anyway but now we are beggars," cries Kanchan as she implores all and sundry to help her with food and medicine for her 65-year-old spouse.

The worst hit by the cyclone are people who had been living in slums and shanties and have nowhere to go now.

The home of Bhaskar Sahu, a 34-year-old mason, has been reduced to a heap of mud and slush, making it difficult to retrieve domestic articles, which have got buried underneath. Sahu, an old resident of the capital who is practically jobless now, confesses he has never seen nature in a more furious and violent from before in his life. "I felt I would die. The wind must have been blowing at the speed of about 300 km per hour," he said. He is not wide off the mark for the official sources are now admitting that the storm, which remained static over Bhubaneswar for eight hours and the state's Paradip port for four hours, had a velocity of nearly 300 km per hour.

Says CNN's Delhi bureau chief Satinder Bindra, who was in the fishing village and beach retreat of Digha when the cyclone hit, "Not in my life have I seen sea like that, not in my life have I seen winds like that. It was scary."

Bindra, who with his crew drove to Orissa from Calcutta,

said shooting was out of the question when they entered Digha as the rain was coming down in torrents. "I saw trees bending in half, I saw waves cresting to 30 feet," he said. "It was nature in all its fury," he said.

Being residents of the state capital has not brought the victims any special favours from the administration, which appeared to be paralysed even 24 hours after the cyclone hit the state. In fact, relief trucks, parked at Chief Minister Giridhar Gamang's official residence, started moving out to the affected areas only 48 hours after the tragedy struck.

The delay led to rioting in some areas of the capital and the resultant panic made shopkeepers wary of opening their shops. "All that I have got from the government so far is half a kilogram of coarse rice. Is that enough to take care of the needs of a family of six for three days?" asks Sahu indignantly.

Such anger is visible everywhere. So much so that even relief vehicles have been attacked in certain parts. Schools are closed, offices are barely functioning and the debris is still lying on the roads of Bhubaneswar which is barely recognisable.

Be it the Secretariat, the state Assembly or the famous Indira Gandhi Park, they have all turned into a graveyard, with trees, telephons and electric poles scattered everywhere. The local television centre and radio stations are yet to resume work. Barely 50-100 telephones are working here and it would take no less than a week for Bhubaneswar's power and water supply to resume, officials say. Evenings here are being spent in utter darkness and life has come to a standstill.

As for the other affected districts like Cuttack, Jagatsinghpur, Kendrapara,

Jaipur, Nayagarh, Puri, Bhadrak, all communication links with the state capital have been disrupted and roads are yet to be cleared for relief to reach these areas. That is the reason why casualty figures from most of these districts are still unavailable and the official toll is yet to cross 49, even though everybody fears that the actual toll is in thousands.

Though the administration, wiser from the experience of the preceding cyclone in Berhampur a week ago, had sounded a warning about the coming storm, it failed to guess correctly the wind speed and the duration of the gale. The weather pundits had not imagined in their wildest dreams that the cyclone would become static over Bhubaneswar for eight hours.

The damage in Kendrapara district, including Paradip, has been much more extensive because of its proximity to the sea. With the highway to Paradip yet to be cleared, it is difficult for the authorities to assess the damage, but the maximum casualties are feared to have occurred in this area. According to preliminary estimates, of the 15 million people affected by the cyclone all over the state, nearly 30 per cent hail from the three districts of Kendrapara, Jagatsinghpur and Khurda.

To make things worse, the state government owing to the failure of its own communication network, has been unable to project a true picture of the damage and its requirement to the federal government and the police and army units rushed to Orissa. Twenty-four hours after the tragedy, Chief Minister Gamang was the only person from Orissa who could establish contact with people outside the state with his satellite telephone.

-India Abroad News Service

Lesson Unlearnt?

The Congress party in India may push itself into deeper decline, writes K. K. Katyal

IN ITS long history, the Congress has faced many reversals in the election but no reversal has dampened the spirit of the Congress. Invariably, the party has renewed and rejuvenated itself after such reversals. It shall do so again — this is the CWC's preliminary reaction to the party's performance in the recent Lok Sabha poll, pending a detailed analysis. To downplay the outcome as a debacle of the type the Congress suffered in the past was, perhaps, considered necessary for the consumption of the members and supporters and for keeping up their morale. But it is not just another setback. The party's tally in the Lok Sabha is the lowest ever — 112 as against the previous low of 140 — and, as such, this is the heaviest and most humiliating blow.

Secondly, this is its longest spell out of office at the Centre (last time, in 1977-79, it was without power for less than three years. It has been in the Opposition since the beginning of 1996 and there is no prospect of its regaining power for the foreseeable future). The Congress(I) was pushed into a deeper decline if its leadership deludes itself into treating the debacle as a routine reverse (the CWC resolution called it "reversal"). It may have been a case of bad English but, unwittingly, the party spoke the truth, the hard truth. "Reversal of a situation", according to the dictionary meaning, "involves changing it so that it becomes the opposite of what it was before."

A committee, set up for an "introspection and analysis of the performance of the party", will take time to produce a report. But if the initial behaviour of the leadership is any

indication, it is unlikely to learn any lesson. What else is the meaning of the competitive cynicism that marked the CWC deliberations held in the wake of the debacle? Or do the reports that the coterie around the president, Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, continues to call the shots? Or of the theatrical motions gone through by party functionaries in offering resignations? Or of the manner in which "the leader", on the one hand, accepted moral responsibility for the poor performance and, on the other, was encouraged to strengthen her hold over both the organisational and parliamentary wings?

It is inconceivable for any committee, set up by the CWC, to suggest, a course of action that would mean the undoing of this consolidation process or for the top leaders to accept any such arrangement, assuming that such a recommendation is made. Apart from continuing as the Congress(I) president, Mrs. Gandhi is the chairperson of the parliamentary party and head of the party in the Lok Sabha and, in that capacity, leader of the Opposition. The proposal to have someone else for the Lower House position was mooted at one stage but was shot down for fear of the emergence of a parallel power centre. Even the idea of Mrs. Gandhi nominating a senior member for the Lok Sabha post (the N. D. Tiwari) did not find favour with those who mattered. They rejected outright the idea of filling the position through election (Mr. Rajesh Pillai expressed his desire to contest and this, perhaps, hastened the demise of the idea, which in any case had remained tenuous). What was the message that was conveyed in the process? That the

Congress(I) increased its reliance on one family and sank deeper into the dynastic mould? Was there a case for Mrs. Gandhi stepping down as the Congress(I) president?

The point was made only in stray, muted voices within the party. In support was cited the parallel of Mr. Sitaram Kesri, who was forced out of the party post after the 1998 reverse. No one in the Congress(I) was open with such a demand which, interestingly, was made by other parties with gusto. Good, sound reasons could be adduced to counter such a suggestion but the party seniors, speaking in her defence, did not seem concerned with logic. Their intolerance betrayed their real motive — to exhibit abject loyalty. Some say Mrs. Gandhi is not fully aware of the games played by the coterie which is as wielding a disproportionate — and extra-constitutional — authority. It may be true, but could the courtiers continue to operate if they are not tolerated?

This phenomenon leads to distortions in decision-taking processes. It is responsible for the way the leadership was made to act in panic rather than with confidence, in the wake of the poll debacle. Visions of another Sharad Pawar emerging on the Lok Sabha scene were conjured up to make out a case against filling the party post in the House through contest — or even through nomination. The centralisation of power was based on fear, not strength. The job of the coterie became easy because of the prevailing Congress culture. Even during the Nehru era, there was serious trouble whenever different persons headed the Government and the party. After his death, the party split

when Indira Gandhi as the Prime Minister and K. Kamaraj as the party president, along with others of the old guard, found it hard to act in unison. The two posts have since been held by one and the same leader to avoid the chances of a conflict.

In the past, the momentum generated by the Congress' role in the freedom struggle helped it contain the damage caused by the erosion of institutionalised functioning. That advantage could not last long and the decline set in. It was arrested on two occasions by major tragedies — the assassinations of Indira Gandhi in 1984 and of Rajiv Gandhi six years later. After a while, the party could not escape the consequences of political dynamics. This was evident from its continued slide down in the recent past. Of course, there were several other factors that led to the loss of its credibility but the party does not seem to be in a mood to address them.

The political developments would have taken a different turn had the Congress(I) — again under the influence of the coterie — not taken to unilateralism after the defeat of the Vajpayee Government in the Lok Sabha earlier this year. It was the party's insistence on forming a government on its own terms, in the way of a non-BJP alternative. The chances for a new Government were bright but Mrs. Gandhi's action pressing her claim, instead of heeding the suggestions for a collective approach, dealt a fatal blow to the move.

The Congress(I)'s prevarication — on the eve of and during the just-concluded election — on sharing power with others in a coalition was responsible, in no small measure, for its misfor-

tune. The party landed itself in a serious contradiction when it, on the one hand, entered into significant alliances — with the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu, the Laloو party in Bihar and the AIT group in western U.P. (apart from its keenness on a tie-up with the BSP) — and, on the other, adopted a high and mighty attitude. This approach remains unchanged, as is evident from the CWC resolution — "In keeping with the spirit of Pachmarhi and in contrast to the ruling coalition, the Congress will not have recourse to unstable, unviable opportunistic alliances united only by the lust for office".

The reference is to the brainstorming session at Pachmarhi held in the first week of September last year when the party adopted a position which, on balance, was weighted against coalitions — "coalitions will be considered only when absolutely necessary which will not weaken the party or compromise its basic ideology". At Pachmarhi, Mrs. Gandhi was optimistic about the Congress(I) recovering lost ground — "I get the feeling that the country, fed up with over two years of non-governance, is waiting to give us another chance."

I get the feeling that more and more people who moved away from us are once again coming round to the point of view that only the Congress has the experience, the expertise, the energy and the enthusiasm to provide an effective government." That assumption has proved wrong. There is a case for the Congress(I) revising its other formulations — on coalitions, for instance.

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Problems Ironed Out?

Prasad Gunewardena writes on both President Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe, who are busy wining friends

IT'S now reconciliation time in the PA and the UNP. Both President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Ranil Wickremesinghe are busy meeting their parliamentarians who claim to have differences with the leadership to iron out problems. These parliamentarians, who found it difficult to meet the leaders freely, are now warmly accommodated by the two leaders as the Presidential election is around the corner.

Last week, President Kumaratunga met her MPs and ministers with whom she was at loggerheads in the past for defying her orders. The top one on the list were was Jinasena Nandasena from the Gampaha district. Nandasena had been rapped by the President many a time for misconduct on his part during election time. The last occasion he was reprimanded was during the Western Province elections. Nandasena had then retorted saying, come what may he would have his own way and if he felt like it he would refrain from supporting the PA.

A few days ago, President Kumaratunga summoned Nandasena for a meeting. Nandasena told about his grievances to the President and claimed that Sri Lanka Mahajana Party supporters in the PA fold were given the best of treatment while long-standing SLPPers were afforded step motherly treatment. The point made by Nandasena is being endorsed by many a SLPPer as SLMP members are given priority over them in many districts. The President who met Nandasena for nearly an hour assured that he would be looked after well in the future and sought his support in the Gampaha district for her election.

The Sunday before the last Jeyaraj Fernandopulle had a meeting with the President at Temple Trees. Jeyaraj is one man who had shown close letter for having criticised her staff and the Lake House Newspapers. The President had a one-to-one meeting for nearly ninety minutes. The minister appeared happy after the meeting and PA sources say that the hatchet has been buried. Though the PA men claim so, the election organisational matters in the Gampaha District is reported to have been entrusted to Deputy Minister of Power Felix Perera.

Earlier, it was Jeyaraj Fernandopulle who led the election campaign in the district. Felix Perera is a former Mahajana Party man and a close friend of the late Vijaya Kumaratunga. Having met Jeyaraj, the President next spoke to deputy minister Reggie Ranatunga. The Ranatunga family had been having problems with the PA over a time where even cricket had been involved. However, the outcome of the discussion between the President and Reggie Ranatunga was not known.

On the UNP side, its leader Ranil Wickremesinghe on the Tuesday before the last met some of his parliamentarians who claimed to have grievances and had thought of quitting the party. The first was Dr. Sarath Amunugama. The previous day, the UNP leader was informed by some of his confidantes that Sarath was getting ready to quit the UNP and join the PA. Some emissaries of the UNP leader were unsuccessful in reaching Sarath that day as Sarath was out of his residence and the cellular phone left at home. Towards the evening a message was left at Sarath's home requesting him to meet the leader the next morning. Accordingly he met the UNP leader and told him that he was frustrated as he has not been duly recognised in the party and added that some morons have infiltrated Sri Lanka to poison the mind of the UNP leader. He, however, did not identify who those morons were. After a lengthy discussion Dr. Amunugama assured the UNP leader that he would stay on with the UNP. During the talks, Dr. Amunugama did not speak about the offer that had come to him from President Kumaratunga to join the PA to be made a minister.

On Thursday before the last Dr. Amunugama's position appeared different as the government was preparing to accommodate him. As a first step the President split the Ministry of Public Administration and Plantation Industries. The possibility is that Dr. Amunugama may be offered Public Administration. Though Dr. Amunugama claims he would not leave the UNP he does not deny, that the PA is waiting for him. If he accepts the offer he would have to wait till November 09 to resign and take fresh oath as a PA National List MP. Sources close to Dr. Amunugama said yesterday that he has decided to maintain silence in politics for some time.

Among the others who met the UNP leader was Asoka Wadiganagawa from the Puttalam District. He sacrificed his parliamentary seat for the North Western PC elections. He has no role to play today as the UNP continues to boycott the NWPC. The UNP leader who listened to him promised to look after him. In response he assured that he would stay with party and support Mr. Wickremesinghe at the December elections. Senior most party man Wijeyapala Mendis has assured his support to the party and his friend Srisena Cooray has decided to be neutral during the presidential election as he does not want to harm his old party. Having made this announcement Mr. Cooray took wing to Australia for a long holiday. He is likely to return on the eve of the Presidential election.

Courtesy: The Island of Sri Lanka.

Sinking into the Sand

Ayaz Amir looks at the first batch of names chosen for the National Security Council and the cabinet in Pakistan

THIS was supposed to be a blitzkrieg, carrying everything before it, smashing the pillars of corruption and the waters of the five rivers red with the blood of accountability. It is accounting instead all the hallmarks of a classic battle of attrition reminiscent of the trench warfare of 1914-18.

Nothing so strikingly illustrates this as the first batch of names chosen for the National Security Council (NSC) and the cabinet. After 15 days of frenzied consultations, is this what the army has to show for its pains? It does not say much for the skill employed in the search or indeed for the abundance of talent available in the Islamic Republic.

Sharifuddin Pirzada as the principal adviser to the Chief Executive? The mind boggles. Pirzada has been adviser, legal counsel, eminence grise to every tinpot dictator since Field Marshal Ayub Khan. What are the generals hoping to get from him? If they want the status quo defended, he is their man. But if this takeover is about changing the nation's destiny, as the Chief Executive insists it is, what will be Pirzada's role who is already saying that his inclusion in the new setup is not a full-time job? Interestingly, as in the deal he swung with General Zia whose legal adviser he also was, membership in the highest councils of government will not debar Pirzada from his private practice.

The finance commissar of the revolution unfolding before our eyes is Dr. Yaqub who in his extended term as State Bank Governor may not have done

much to turn the economy around but who has definitely set a record of survival which most politicians would envy. Although a clutch of scandals and scams have hit the banking sector during his stewardship of the State Bank — the Mehran Bank scandal, the travails of Bankers Equity Ltd., Nawaz Sharif's various yellow schemes, the Mera Ghar programme — the reputation for probity and financial brilliance of Pakistan's very own Alan Greenspan remains intact. At Attiya Enayattullah's inclusion in the NSC the mind does not only boggle, it goes into a bewildered daze. She is a charming lady and a great lobbyist of the causes she espouses (population control, her own career, and not necessarily in that order), but as far as having a measure of Pakistan's problems is concerned, she is simply out of her depth.

The fourth person to have been inducted into the NSC is Intiaz Sahibzada. He is a nice person (every one seems to be a nice person around here) and a Gallian (alumnus of Lawrence College) to boot. But, pray, what in heaven's name is he expected to achieve?

Foreign minister is Abdus Sattar. As foreign secretary he was taken seriously. Ever since he takes himself seriously, a sense of humour seemingly alien to the man. To plumb his depths further read the longish dissertation on nuclear matters which he recently co-authored with Mr. Agha Shahi and Air Chief Marshal Zulfiqar Ali Khan although I suspect most of it was written by him. That a single document should bristle with so many contradictions

and half-baked generalizations is quite amazing.

Finance minister is a New York import (Citibank), Shaukat Aziz. Why Pakistan must remain dependent upon such fly-by-night reformers will remain a mystery till the cows finally come home. Fifteen days if not more of anguished cogitation, and 140 million people to choose from, and this is what we get. Obviously, there is no escaping the glitter of mediocrity in this country.

General Jahangir Karamat has a lot to answer for: for the weakness he showed at several turnings when a bit of firmness was demanded and for this idea of a national security council (the reason for his quarrel with Nawaz Sharif) which his successors have picked up from him. What good will it do? Apart from the other service chiefs who are in it as of right, its other members are creatures of the Chief Executive. Will they be able to advise him in the real sense of the word and check him should the need so arise? If not, and they simply sing to his tune, or pander to the shibboleths which become the received wisdom of the moment, what useful purpose will they serve?

As a check on a democratically-elected government, an NSC can make sense from the military's point of view (I repeat from the military's point of view). But in a military setup it is not only a contradiction in terms but also an exercise in redundancy. There will be the corps commanders calling the shots from the wings. There will be the cabinet advising the Chief Executive and helping him implement policy (or

whatever passes for policy in Pakistan). How many more layers of advice does the country need?

All this amounts to running on the same spot. What does it betoken? To most people it would look like confusion. If something looks like a duck, waddles like a duck and quacks like a duck, in all probability it is a duck. In the same way, something smelling so strongly of confusion is probably confusion. Most of this confusion stems from a lack of clarity about aim and objectives, a serious falling in any endeavour but absolutely fatal in a military undertaking where decisiveness of action is lost if the mission is not defined with clarity and precision.

The trouble is that whenever the army has ridden into the political arena it has done so on the back of its certainties, convinced that in every problem there is a black and white solution. It has usually not tended to understand (1) that life is a complex affair, often a messy one, with little of the beguiling simplicity of the parade ground; (2) that politics is not a search for perfection, because perfection we will find only in heaven, but an undertaking in which a choice all the time has to be made between lesser and greater evils; and (3) that given its make-up and ethos, its conservative background and the intellectual limitations of its higher echelons, the Pakistan army can never be a wholly satisfactory or ideal instrument of lasting reform.

It is not a question of individuals being good or bad. General Musharraf may be a very nice person but that is not

the issue. The issue is that power, especially untrammelled power, encourages arbitrary and whimsical behaviour. This has been the sub-continental norm throughout history. This has been the Pakistani norm since 1947. Ghulam Muhammad, Iskander Mirza, Ayub Khan, Yahya, Bhutto, Zia, Benazir, Nawaz Sharif: all of them, regardless of whether they were elected or not, have exercised power in the manner of mediaeval despots, treating the state as their personal estate, the state's servants as their personal retainers.

Wherein lies the answer then? At the risk of sounding anti-climactic, it lies in creating a new set of institutions are developed and laws respected. If this task requires time and hard work it begins with a crucial step: ensuring that in all seasons the state's functionaries are chosen for their merit and talent and not their political usefulness. If the army can provide just this, if it can leave in place constitutionally-protected checks which ensure, firstly, that in the judiciary and bureaucracy the best available people are appointed and, secondly, that the administration of justice and the maintenance of law and order are insulated from the influence of politics, sifarish and money, it will have done its job and earned the nation's gratitude. Addressing the other problems facing the country can then proceed in an institutional rather than an ad-hoc manner.

Courtesy: The Dawn of Pakistan.