

BTTB with mobile phone and private sector

Level playing fields, but quality services too
BTTB's entry into private sector mobile phone service has caused a bit of tremors, both positive and negative. Consumers are hoping that this will create greater competition and therefore better service. But the private sector companies are concerned that BTTB may enjoy facilities that will deny a level playing field to all of them and cause an over-competition crisis. While the private sector welcomed the competition, they were cautious in the move because it threatened the extraordinary growth-driven environment in which the private telecom companies had formed the most successful business sector in the country.

Since BTTB has functioned as the regulatory body for long and the operating companies have been paying their dues to BTTB, there is concern that BTTB may enjoy regulatory bias that is not available to the others.

What however may change is the huge profit powered by an increasing demand matched by limited supply. The operators and the regulators have both benefited much from it and that is the scenario that has pushed the authorities to look for more suppliers.

The questions raised by the operators are about fair competition. That is about the economics of managing a private sector company fighting in the market with a government owned operator that may get an extra leg up. This has to be fought out in the corridors of power and if necessary law. The right to level playing ground in business is a fundamental one and if the government is serious about internal and external investment, it will ensure that BTTB is just another company.

But the private sector companies will also have to look at present competition trends and the client's convenience. Presently, the user often feels ignored and complaints about the services of these companies rarely surface publicly for whatever reasons. But now, with the customer being the biggest argument for any business decision, the clients will certainly not be bothered about the profit margins of existing companies and see what they can get from what promises to be a price and services war.

The government has however got to stand a step back and make sure that its own business venture makes everyone the winner including the companies operating today.

Stop the canal filling project

Bring the culprits to book

Another natural canal *Haikkar Khal* is about to go extinct. Unless a pre-emptive step is taken right-away, the water channel will go the way of 22 other canals hitherto lost to human predation.

An earth-filling operation designed to construct a truck terminal and a children's park has been kicked off by dredging the khal bed. The project originally okayed by former mayor Mohammad Hanif and shelved for the last five years because of press reports has been revived by the Dhaka City Corporation. Even if the canal was in a moribund state, which it evidently is not, given its ebullient flow condition, the project would still have presented a serious environmental hazard. Actually, five years ago this was abandoned in the face of criticism that it contravened with the wetland protection act besides blocking public commutation through that natural waterway. Those weighty objections to the project remain intact, whilst it raises the spectre furthermore of the highly disquieting sealing off of a natural drainage channel and replacing it with nothing better than a truck terminal.

The children's park idea is a veritable disaster scenario with as many as 2000 trucks pictured to move in and out of the 10-acre area belching carbon monoxide around. In addition, it will desecrate the memorial for martyred intellectuals which is located nearby.

But taking heart from mayor Sadeq Hossain Khoka's expression of surprise over the 'project' together with the DCC superintendent engineer's ignorance about it, we are expecting the corporation to immediately cry a halt to it.

As the so-called project is ordered closed, a full-scale inquiry needs to be launched to find out how it has been revived and by whom. That over, the culprits should be made to face the consequences of their action.

The invasion of Iraq: A deadly American obsession



M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE threat of a US invasion of Iraq with a view to toppling Saddam Hussein from power is no more a matter of speculation. Speaking at a news briefing early last month as the President of the United States himself declared his intention to oust the Iraqi leader using all the means at the disposal of the US and that he was examining "all aspects of the issue" the prospect of the US attacking Iraq became ominously real. The declaration came shortly after Bush's address at West Point in which he claimed the right to launch preemptive attacks on potential adversaries. Indeed, as reported by *New York Times* of 5 June, "tens of thousands of marines and soldiers will invade Iraq from Kuwait. Hundreds of warplanes based in eight countries, possibly including Turkey and Qatar where the Americans have been developing al-Udeid air base as an alternative to Prince Sultan air base in Saudi Arabia, would unleash huge air assault against thousands of targets including airfields, roadways and fibre-optic communication sites." The CentCom Course of Action as it has been dubbed -- the latest US plan of war on Iraq conjures up the spectre

of which is dangerously close to unfolding cruelties in the Gulf. Leaked to *New York Times* the plan calls for attacks on Iraq by US air, land and sea-based forces from the north, south and west in coordination with covert operations inside Iraq. The goal is to install a pro-US regime in Baghdad. As many as 2,50,000 US troops would be involved in the invasion. The US administration treated the disclosure as routine -- as if the US has the inherent and undisputed right to

defence from its all recent pronouncements on Iraq. The old refrain of Iraq developing weapon of mass destruction (WMD) is back and alive. It, therefore, demands that Iraq accepts an intrusive and US-controlled arms inspection -- in other words, the spies must be allowed to roam throughout Iraq as the US prepares for its war. After the talks between Iraqi officials and Kofi Annan broke off in Vienna recently the US State Department summarily condemned Iraq by calling

latter from its ire. The US' obsession, in fact, grows out of Iraq's defiance that undermines US hegemony in the oil rich Middle East and tarnishes its standing as the world's sole superpower. By toppling the current Iraqi government and installing a pro-US regime, the US hopes to tighten its grip on Persian Gulf oil -- and all who depend on it. The US administration hopes that an Iraq under a new government could become a new Western ally, thus helping to reduce

tensions before. And the myths are built-up apparently to further demonise Iraq so that its invasion is justified. This is not first such attempt. The *Wall Street Journal* of 14 June reveals that within days of terrorist attacks on the US last year, top Bush advisers argued over whether or not to strike on Iraq -- even though there was no real evidence that Saddam regime had anything to do with the terrorist attack.

It is hard to predict when exactly

Saddam Hussein. What happens then is indeed mind-boggling. A collapse of Saddam will invariably turn the Kurd-majority north into an independent state. Such a state will be source of trouble for both Turkey and Iran where Kurdish minority would want to join with the Iraqi Kurdish state. Both Iran and Turkey will obviously resist such a move and this may prove highly destabilising for both. A similar situation could take place in the Shia-majority South thus fragmenting Iraq with its huge oil wealth. The prospect of such a fragmentation is too horrifying to contemplate.

A US attack on Iraq will set off a new wave to anger and resentment all across the Arab and Muslim world with unpredictable developments for the region and beyond. A military strike may be able to remove Saddam Hussein but it would throw Iraq back into the stone age and unleash a new anti-American wave in the region. This will hardly serve the cause of the war on terror. Worse, the anti-American wave may turn popular opinion in the Arab world against those Arab regimes which are friendly to Washington. This will destabilise many Arab countries. Those likely to gain from such widespread anarchy may be hard-line anti-American militants. Israel also may get involved in such a war leading perhaps to a wider conflict. This will hardly serve the cause of world peace or the US' own geopolitical interests in the sensitive region of Middle East. One hopes that sanity would prevail to make the Americans understand that a military operation against Iraq is too full of horrifying consequence to be considered as a policy option.

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PERSPECTIVES

A US attack on Iraq will set off a new wave to anger and resentment all across the Arab and Muslim world with unpredictable developments for the region and beyond. A military strike may be able to remove Saddam Hussein but it would throw Iraq back into the stone age and unleash a new anti-American wave in the region. This will hardly serve the cause of the war on terror. Worse, the anti-American wave may turn popular opinion in the Arab world against those Arab regimes which are friendly to Washington.

openly plot war on whomever, wherever.

While the apprehensions are rife that the US was preparing to launch military strike against Iraq the US airforce chief General Jumper reinforced the notion by saying that the US would go ahead with its plans even if regional governments opposed the move and did not allow the US troops the use of their facilities. He said the US troops were capable of deployment outside the region and using other bases to attack targets inside Iraq. "We possessed the capability of deploying operation centres in different areas and using advanced information technologies to receive and send information," he asserted.

The unilateralist tone and temper of Bush administration is appar-

her a threat to regional security. Iraq's argument that any agreement on arms inspection must be a part of an overall agreement on what exactly constitute compliance with a UN resolution is set aside allowing the US to call Iraq a 'non-compliant' - no matter, what steps it takes.

Iraq's 'non-compliance' has since been the prime excuse for maintaining sanction against it for more than a decade -- a crime that killed half a million Iraqi children as its result. This is in spite of what a number of former UN arms inspectors have to say in this regard. According to them Iraq has largely been disarmed. Even Pentagon officials admit that Iraq's current military is only one third of its 1990 size. Yet the US is obsessed enough with Iraq not to spare the

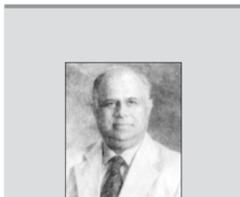
American dependence on increasingly inhospitable Saudi Arabian bases, to secure Israel's eastern flank and act as a wedge between Iran and Syria

Waging war on Iraq is also seen as a crucial test of so-called Bush doctrine of preemptive wars against any the US considers a threat. The Bush administration seems determined to demonstrate to the world that the US is willing and able to crush any challenger, or sweep away any impediment to its power. In a desperate search for suitable excuse the US obsession with Iraq reached a new peak when American press suggested links between Baghdad and al-Qaida and that Saddam regime had armed and provided training to al-Qaida men. One had never heard such allega-

the invasion will take place. Reports in western media suggest that Bush could time it with the presidential election to be able to win another term. Other reports however doubt if the invasion will be delayed that long and that one can expect a military strike much earlier. Timing apart, an invasion of Iraq is fraught with horrifying consequences for the region and could open a Pandora's Box. None of the US' Arab allies approve of an invasion of Iraq to oust its President Saddam Hussein. The US' European allies are also split over the issue. Russia also denounced the plan as "absolutely inadmissible".

But what should be most worrisome not only to the United States but the international community is the likely scenario in Iraq after

Crunch time



IKRAM SEHGAL
writes from Karachi

THAT this military regime has been able to manage 'good governance' as much as a basically corrupt system will allow without the formal declaration of martial law is no mean achievement. Yet in not being able to bring the Bhutto-Zardari combine and the Sharifs to justice as promised at the beginning of their tenure, the Musharraf government have managed to resurrect the fortunes of those who should have been politically dead and gone. The eloquent official waxing about our present rosy situation notwithstanding, what we have today is a political morass without great future for the country. Economically, we are far better off than on Oct 12, 1999, sound reforms and 9/11 combining with really good monetary policies of the State Bank of Pakistan to provide a good base for economic resurgence.

Living in a glass house, the Choudhry Shujaats of this world do need the discretion of a front man, relatively clean (but nevertheless a nonentity outside of Lahore) Azhar is custom-built to take the heat, and if the electoral manipulation by the civil administration succeeds, odds-on favourite to be our next PM. Is this what Pakistan deserves? All the print and electronic media (barring PTV) have confirmed that the Choudhrys of Gujrat have Tariq Aziz as a friend, obviously he carries greater clout than Lt Gen Hamid Javed, the other Principal Staff Officer (PSO) to the Chief Execu-

agenda, the present situation is unacceptable. The government's credibility having taken a hit because it has failed to carry out accountability of the superior judiciary and men in uniform, it is now being forced into political compromises tarnishing the image of the Armed Forces. Bringing Mansoorul Haq to justice was not enough, it was extremely important for the credibility of this regime to go after other "untouchables" without dis-

trata of society, whether one is in politics, judiciary, the Armed Forces, civil administration, business, etc. nepotism and favouritism are always far more important than what one owes to the nation.

A PPP sweep was possible before Shahbaz stepped into the political vacuum. Less than 60 days short of the Oct 10 electoral day, the "Alliances" that the government's functionaries have been desperately trying to cement together is not enough to stop, viz (1) a PPP-PML (N) total sweep if they decide to do an adjustment of seats pre-election, and/or (2) a PPP-PML (N) coalition post-election with other like-minded parties even without seat adjustments. PML (Q-A) has stalwarts capable of winning on their own but a PML (Q-A)-led Grand Alliance governments are only possible with massive electoral manipulation, if not outright fraud and rigging.

To a person who strongly believes in Pervaz Musharraf and that he has a sincere and patriotic

crimination. Bringing in a so-called "democratic" regime that can only thrive on "corrupt practices" is something the military regime have been accusing their predecessors of, the stalwarts of PML (Q-A) can hardly cast stones. Incidentally character assassination is a "dirty trick" invariably used by intelligence agencies, full-scale mud-slinging (the unsigned anonymous AGENCY report) can be traced in today's electronic world to loud-mouth scoundrels desperate to avoid accountability by trying to shut those voices that can identify their hidden "monetary" connections. Remember the adage, "the taller they are, the harder they fall!"

Utopia is always a dream, it can never be a practical option. One has to take a hard look at realities, pragmatism always superceding idealism. Accepting that real-politik rules the world, one also must look for as little compromises as possible. The Armed Forces were quite right in intervening when they did,

the country was economically and politically bankrupt, the uniformed must now get out of politicking forthwith. People comment that with Tanvir Naqvi around Pervaz Musharraf does not need enemies, the fact remains that the Lt Gen Naqvi's attempt at reforms has been sincere, and also partly successful. With an autonomous NAB mandated to bringing accountability proceedings against anybody deserving of prosecution, constitu-

and his inner-Saifur Rahman-core, Shahbaz Sharif's wearing of the mantle was received with a sinking feeling by his PPP opponents and former friends in the PML alike. While Mian Azhar had been marginalised and slighted, and the Choudhrys were frustrated in trying to rule the Punjab, others do not have a serious grouse with the talented brother. Despite the accountability baggage he carries he will more than likely carry the

most. A new generation of Pakistanis have grown up on his clean athletic image, will his charisma excite the middle-aged and senior citizens enough for him to become an electoral factor? In late Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's triumph in West Pakistan against the odds of 1970, he had cobbled together quite a number of feudals who would have won on their own right, those who lost to his candidates were badly dissatisfied. 2002 is not 1970 and Imran Khan's political cupboard is bare of that experience and political capital, it may well be that this "reverse swing" appeal carries votes to his camp, the mood of the electorate is presently difficult to gauge.

The President must exercise control over those who speak on his behalf, in the public perception their blatant political bias is not doing him any favour. If the intelligence agencies were doing their job, Pervaz Musharraf would know that a couple of his close aides are the most hated of men among his own men in uniform, and for reasons having little to do with the profession. However khakis have no business issuing political statements, the uniformed should not meddle in politics. Even the President, eloquent as usual during the flag-hoisting ceremony on Independence Day, must remain above politics. He must ensure his subordinates and colleagues confirm by their word and deed that he means what he says, they must not follow a different agenda than his own. To ensure their mentor's (but more particularly their own) longevity in office, subordinates frequently become more loyal than the king. On the other hand, if Pervaz Musharraf does not really mean what he says and his close aides are simply implementing a personal agenda the President himself has mapped out, then we have a problem! This country is then in real trouble.

Ikram Sehgal, a former Major of Pakistan Army, is a political analyst and columnist.

AS I SEE IT

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tional amendment proposal giving draconian sacking-of-the-PM powers to the President was counter-productive. Some things are better left unsaid, did this regime ever declare martial law? On the other hand, many of the amendments were necessary for good governance, among them, viz (1) the "graduation" qualification, (2) lowering of voting age from 21 years to 18, (3) disqualification of loan defaulters, (4) the increased seats in the Assemblies and the Senate, (5) direct elections to the Senate (now unfortunately withdrawn) etc. The problem is that theoretical Naqvi's basic sincerity got clobbered at the altar of a very pragmatic culture, then he was unfortunate, being clubbed with the insincerity manifest in the making of the grand alliance.

The formation of the Azhar faction of the PML (credited to Tariq Aziz and/or the ISI) was an easy task given the mishandling of his colleagues by Mian Nawaz Sharif

Punjab, but without Shahbaz seeking adjustment with the PML (Q-A), PPP may well get the opening they need to win in many neck-to-neck seats. It is in the interest of this military government that PML unites so that the two major political groups in the country, the PPP and the PML, are combatants as behoves a democracy. One must not forget that the many regional parties, of Balochistan, the MQM in Sindh, ANP and PPP (Sherpao) in NWFP will make a difference in the Provinces and in the Centre. The Sindh Democratic Alliance (SA) remains an ambiguous electoral entity despite their few ethnic heavyweights. Combined as the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), the alliance of religious parties is a pragmatic move to improve their overall chances, JI, JUI (F), JUI (S), JUP, etc will certainly increase their overall tally.

Imran Khan's Tehrik-i-Insaf remains the real unknown factor, the reduced voting age has helped him

OPINION

Thoughts on student politics

MAHMOOD HAQUE
writes from Srimangal

ZAKARIA Khondokar's write-up "Student politics: Assorted thoughts" (DS 25 July 2002) has actually evoked thoughts which I like to share with the readers. There is nothing wrong with student politics that trains the future leaders of a nation the tricks of the trade. But everything can go wrong if that training is in the wrong direction causing more harm than good. To understand this one has to carefully take into account the severe erosion of moral values of the present times.

There was a time when a house in a locality was pointed with a lot of admiration and envy to have a son who passed his bachelor's degree. That was a time when honesty and humility was respected and practiced. Today a house is pointed with admiration and envy to have a son who is a powerful 'mastaan' of the locality and has easy access to the Secretariat or to ministers' residence. The young generation takes lessons from these very 'prospects' and the result is a geometrical growth of such mastaans in every

locality in both urban and rural scenario. The politics of most of our politicians is now thriving on these 'commodities', which are so readily available to them and at a nominal price.

Leaders of this subcontinent, at the beginning of the last century, like Gandhi, Jinnah, Nehru and many others set high standards of statesmanship, uncompromising political morals, sincere patriotic love and concern for their nation, scrupulous and honest commitments to the politics of the time. Those lower down the ladder like Suhrawardy, A K Fazlul Haque, Bhasani and even younger and upcoming leaders like Sheikh Mujibur Rahman idolised them and their values. The idolising not only came from awe for power but a distinct admiration and respect for the wisdom and the knowledge of the leaders.

Today, many like us may find it difficult to understand that there are so many more who idolise present day leaders. Like their predecessors, these leaders have also set their own examples for their followers to copy. These young tyros will try to imitate their leaders' action

and reaction to solving various political problems. They will mould and pattern themselves on the standards set by their leaders. If engaging mastaans and student leaders benefits their leaders, the trainees will in no time adopt this trick of the trade. As future political leaders of the country they would like to follow suit and jump on to the bandwagon of political success.

What they have learned from their leaders will then be passed on to the next generation of leaders of this country taking us even further from what Gandhi, Jinnah and Nehru set about to establish for their future generations while fighting the British Raj.

The alarming and at times frightening part of the political scenario of Bangladesh is that, being exposed to such degradation of our national politics, our would-be leaders are now being trained on such politics at various levels of our educational institutions under the banner of student politics. If our national politics is termed as dirty and foul then the lessons these trainees are getting through our so-called student politics not hard to understand.

Unless the national politics changes for the better, more and more worthless political leaders will be churned out every year from our educational institutions through a gruelling course of student politics. There is no way to deny that it is impossible to isolate student politics now from our national politics.

I appreciate Mr Zakaria's views that there is no harm if students do their own politics and don't shout slogans for BNP, AL, Jamaat or JP. But just like we cannot keep a specific area clean forever when the whole pond is full of mosses, we cannot isolate students from partisan politics. Therefore student politics should be banned for at least ten years so that all the mosses can be cleaned and a fresh start can take place when the time is ready.

The other matter regarding the nature and intensity of residency problems faced by students coming from the rest of the country, as stated by Mr Zakaria, is in fact primarily due to student politics. Interference in the administrative matters of the university by student leaders is the real culprit. By sheer political muscle they overrule the

lawful decision of the authorities to accommodate their party interests.

Just like Oxford and Cambridge and other such institutions in the world, there are laid down rules and regulations of the universities in Bangladesh, which require to be abided by the students of the university. The muscle of students doing politics and the threatening power they wield because of their political affiliations now simply brush these traditional rules and regulations aside for their party needs.

The other major contribution to this corrupt scenario is the teachers' politics and their often improper involvement in national politics. Depending on the influence they wield on the students who practice politics, such teachers can get away with many omissions and shortcomings. Teachers are alleged to get promotions through Bangabandhu Parishad or Zia Parishad or Jamaat connections without having, say, PhD or taking regular classes simply because of their political affiliation.

Similarly some teachers are flourishing on national politics and in the process imparting that negative

political education to their students. Teachers are often found to be too busy pushing on politics to spend time on teaching for which they are paid every month by the taxpayers. Simply because they hold a political banner, some teachers don't take classes, and close the university for more and longer family vacations adding to the already piled up session jam.

Mr Zakaria points out that all the gun battles on the campus are due to extortion and tender hijacking. Dailies of the country report also otherwise and rightly so because a gun in hand wields power, which cannot distinguish between extortion, tender hijacking, rape and political bulldozing. Superficial swimming on the surface without having the idea of what lies beneath the pond, as said by Mr Zakaria, is exactly what we will be doing by allowing student politics now in our educational institutions. We have to go to depths and find the consequence of allowing such a noble weapon of democracy to fall into the hands of unscrupulous elements that have now taken the nation and the student community hostage.

Sometimes its positive aspects overshadow the negative fall-outs of a great event. We have seen in the past that whenever we had a national crisis and our matured political leaders and intellectuals failed, students came forward to fill the vacuum. This was seen during the British rule, under the Pakistani regime, in our liberation war and in pulling down a military autocrat like Ershad. The fall-out of the students' involvement in the national politics during those national crises is now the present state of our student politics which the nation is currently debating to ban.

It would be wrong to believe that we are at present not threatened by a dynasty driven monarchy or religious extremism and the students may not be needed once again to come to the rescue of the nation. At the same time it would be foolhardy to think that when the need is over the students will "not fool around," and will automatically go back to their studies.

It will indeed be very naive to expect the students to do their bit during a national crisis, go back to their studies, and forget about the

power they wielded during the national crisis. Student leaders of the past are now our national political leaders. Irrespective of party they may support, their politics is either self-centred or at best party politics and never nation building politics. If national leaders of this country do not love our country it is because they have not learned to love their country at the time of their apprenticeship to politics. Leaders who have not learned to love their country can never make national leaders and the present day student politics if allowed to go on unabated will continue to impart the wrong values and training to the future leaders of this country.

Let us then separate students from AL, BNP, JP and Jamaat and go step by step so that mistakes can be corrected readily. As Mr Zakaria pointed our ban on student politics should be based on evidence and not on assumption. Evidence shows that under the present political scenario allowing student politics now will be far more harmful and dangerous to the future of this nation.