

Gujarat: Stage set for a bitter electoral war

Eid Mubarak

Let happiness prevail, misgivings disappear

AS Muslims across the country prepare for their biggest religious festival, we cannot help look back at the Eid-ul-Fitr last year and wonder how things have gone from bad to worse in the span of just one year. The four-party alliance, which rode on public discontent with the incumbent Awami League government for an alarming law and order downslide to a landslide in the general elections, has floundered on its pre-polls pledge to root out crime and violence from society. The crime curve has made an unprecedented rise, forcing Prime Minister Khaleda Zia to call out the army on a countrywide anti-crime operation on October 17. What could be more poignant a testimony to the civil administration's failure and more scathing an affront to the democratic values?

As if it were not enough, the country now faces the stiffest challenge on the diplomatic front in its 31-year history. A moderate Muslim country with proven liberal democratic credentials, Bangladesh has been pushed on to the world stage with the brand of an up-and-coming fundamentalist state by none other than India. Our closest neighbour has suddenly turned up a campaign that there are terrorist bases in Bangladesh and that al-Qaida operatives are very much active here. Unfortunately, in such a grim diplomatic context, our politicians have engaged in another round of mudslinging at each other. They have once again proved that partisan interest means more to them than national interest.

Against such a bleak backdrop, we ready ourselves for the Eid festivities in the hope that the BNP-led government would concentrate more on ensuring good governance at every level of the administration, a promise it has made to the people before the elections. We also hope that it would stop the blame game and focus more on prudent diplomacy to restore the country's image in the international community as a liberal democratic state.

In the midst of a United States-led global war on terrorism, the Muslim countries have found themselves at an uneasy corner. For the militant and destructive acts of a few, the West holds the entire Muslim Ummah in suspicion. Let our resolve be to prove them wrong.

Finally, our good wishes go to our fellow Muslims all over the world. We wish peace and prosperity for all, especially the people of Bangladesh. Eid Mubarak.

UN inspection in Iraq

US should show restraint until the inspection ends

IRAQ'S promise to hand over the details of its weaponry and arms programme before the UN deadline can definitely be termed as a good gesture. So far the UN inspectors seem to have had uninterrupted access to various sites they have wished to visit including a presidential palace which was a major source of confrontations during inspections in 1990s. There was certain uneasiness from Iraq's side, which was expected anyway, but we would urge Iraq again that it should not try to hide anything and outsmart the UN inspection team in any manner. Because that would simply jeopardize the basic objective of this whole initiative which was adopted primarily to avoid any kind of armed conflict.

At the same time, United States also has to show some restraint while making comments until the inspection is over. The latest remarks by President Bush at the Pentagon makes us wonder whether US is almost itching for a war at any cost. We have not seen any obvious signs of non-cooperation with the inspectors so far, even the inspectors themselves have not faced any major obstructions. Therefore sweeping comments like 'the signs are not encouraging' by President Bush could only imply that may be US is losing patience. And that is not a good sign. The UN team may require to make more trips in the future until they are certain of their mission.

We just hope the allegation made by Iraq that the inspection process is a pretext to attack would not come true. The ball is now in Iraq's court. Instead of trying to convince the media, they should concentrate more on convincing the inspectors that they actually do not possess any weapons of mass destruction. Because if they fail to do so, Iraq would have no choice but to face the consequences. But here we would like to say categorically that we don't want a war, all means should be availed to avoid any kind of armed conflict. Let's not be presumptuous, let's wait for the inspection to end and see their reports before passing any final judgement.



M ABDUL HAFIZ

IN the western India state of Gujarat the BJP's gameplan had been to sweep an early election riding the high tide of Hindutva generated since the beginning of the year out of the worst communal violence in the history of India. The chief minister Narendra Modi wanted an election possibly in September so that maximum benefit could be reaped from the prevailing mood before it gradually faded away. The party's central leadership obviously bought the idea of Modi to save its only citadel in a major state from slipping out of control. Narendra Modi already started with preliminaries of the plan that included an attempt to launch the campaign with 'Gauravayatra' although the communal outrages were far from over, the people displaced during the pogrom of the minorities are yet in utter misery and law and order in the state is still grim.

However, a brake was applied to the sinister process by Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) James Michael Lyngdoh who after touring

the riot-torn state put his foot down. He ruled that the present law and order situation and an inter-communal milieu in the state are not congenial for holding an election before the next year. The CEC's ruling was sharply reacted upon by the party heavyweights and government functionaries to whom it was an audacity of the CEC to contradict the plans drawn up by the politicians who run the country. To them it was reminiscent of the legacy of TN

Notwithstanding this virtual knock-out relished by the politicians, Seshan could plug the election expenses, ban pollhoardings, introduce voter ID cards and as the last straw for the politicians he could be brutally rude and arrogant.

But the new CEC is said to be yet more tough. MS Gill, his predecessor, called him a 'boxer' and a tough guy. Most of his colleagues who knew Lyngdoh thoroughly were not surprised at the manner in which he

the attacks on Christians in Dangs in 1999. He added, Lyngdoh was behaving as if he were both CM and Home Minister of India." Narendra Modi did not lag behind. He was equally caustic when he said, "Has Lyngdoh come from Italy? Is he a relation of Sonia Gandhi? They sometimes met in the church, so there must be ties. His interests lie with minorities and are thus against Hindus."

Such attacks on him started even

Yet the BJP mood in the state is upbeat after the EC has finally announced that the Assembly election in Gujarat would be held on 12 December, a date acceptable to two main contenders -- the BJP and Congress. The election will be held in the shadow of months of bloody state-supported communal violence. More than 1000 people were killed and around 1.5 lakh made homeless. Even now sporadic incidents keep occurring in different

out with military precision'. It is to be seen in the next election in Gujarat what impact would this report have on the electorates of Gujarat who are already primed with inter-communal hatred by Modi's systematic stoking of communal fire. However, by means of complicity in Modi's crimes the BJP led government at the centre may score an electoral victory here and there, but they are unlikely to win back the lost trust of Indian electorate.

If India's electoral history is any guide, the parties and individuals that whip up communal passions for political gains are ultimately voted out of office when passions finally cool down. As for Narendra Modi and his co-partners who planned and directed the still on-going violence against Muslim minorities in Gujarat, they deserve to be identified for their hate crimes and rejected by an electorate who are by now posted with the truth about whole episode. Moreover, the electoral picture also is somewhat changed by now with the Congress fielding a tough opponent for Modi. With a tough independent-minded CEC in place and Congress led by Shankarsingh Vaghela known for his guile and ingenuity, Gujarat is set for a bitter war between two wily politicians, both known as tough fighters. Whatever outcome the election in Gujarat may produce it would certainly not be a cake-walk for Modi. Thanks to the Chief Election Commissioner and his vigilant eye for details Modi's road ahead will be strewn with thorns.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

PERSPECTIVES

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Seshan who headed and dominated the Election Commission in early nineties and came crashing down in 1995 after he had frequent brushes with the politicians. His reign of error in the Election Commission (EC) ended unceremoniously when the Supreme Court exposed him for what it was: megalomania, polemic and chicanery. The CEC's transformation of the office for the administration of election to a platform for assaulting the political process in the name of executing his constitutional mandate was clearly rejected by the Supreme Court Bench.

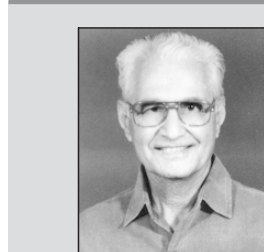
went about his job as CEC in Gujarat. They say he may have rubbed people the wrong way but cannot be faulted for doing his duty. Despite Narendra Modi's barbs the CEC is regarded by one and all as upright and honest. The only quarter he drew flacks from is BJP.

LK Advani, the Deputy Prime Minister, unhappy over Lyngdoh's postponement of election, angrily commented that "CEC's job is to hold election, not hold up election". Praveen Togadia of VHP was more pungent in alleging that the CEC "as a Christian, was taking revenge for

while he was touring Gujrat. It was as if the BJP could see the tidings. And when he returned to pronounce what many see as the death warrant for Modi, the dam burst. But if anyone has doubts about the man's ability to fight back they should have a ward with Gill, his predecessor who said shortly before demitting his office, "This man is a boxer. He can fight well." But Lyngdoh from a tribal stock from Meghalaya has so far been reticent and restrained. All his comments have been about officials who tried to hoodwink him into announcing election in Gujarat.

parts of the state. With the peace somewhat restored the EC's formidable task will now be updating of electoral roll. In the meantime the findings of an independent tribunal headed by a retired supreme court judge investigating Gujarat communal riots categorically indicted Narendra Modi and his state government for planning the violence. The nine-member tribunal comprised retired supreme and high court judges and civil right lawyers who recorded a total of 2094 statements by survivors of what the report has called a 'genocide carried

Stumbling into foreign perils



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

FOLLOWING the American media reports of a Pakistan-North Korea trading of nuclear know-how for missile technology, American Secretary of State has given a public warning to this country of possible 'consequences'. Russian President Vladimir Putin has twice in recent days warned that there is a danger that Pakistan's nuclear weapons can fall into undesirable hands. There is also a widely felt and expressed fear that given this country's political instability, created by the absence of viable democratic institutions, Islamic zealots' fingers can reach the red button. Sober elements inside Pakistan share some of these fears.

This is not the only worry. There is the unending confrontation with India -- military and political -- that can take any turn. It is possible to see it as a passing phenomenon because the BJP governments are using Pakistan as an election issue in the upcoming Gujarat state election and may also do so for the general election in 2004 if the play works in Gujarat. For the longer term, many hold that India is bigger and more variegated than BJP and its cohorts; other forces may soon replace BJP and better business can be transacted with, say a Congress-ruled India.

BJP government's possible

passing into history is not enough to cheer up. Let's not forget that all the three wars with India took place when Congress was in power, not to mention the Kashmir dispute and the bitterness left behind by 1946 and 1947's largest-in-history ethnic cleansing and unlimited murders. Moreover, BJP's ascent to power has probably profoundly changed India, some of which is likely to survive BJP governments. India may have become far more Hindu than it was under Nehrus and

stan so long as it does not stop all cross-border terrorism; Mr. Vajpayee has the information that more Hindu Mandirs are going to become terrorists' targets; Mr. Advani advises Pakistan to fight the fourth war rather than attack hapless worshippers; and so forth. The last three years have been a worsening of relations, in terms of roused communal sentiments, that parallels only the Hindu-Muslim line up in 1940s. One is more worried about the permanent damage that is being

Why? The simple reason is the mindsets that determine policy-making in the two countries. Foreign policies of both countries are anchored in the attitudes and tendencies that have defined the sub-continent's communalisms. They are basically non-democratic, refusing to submit the contentious issues to democratic precepts because the inimical feelings are stronger. The real purpose is to ensure the enemy's defeat rather

sentimentality in contrast with their hard-nosed realism. Let's remind the 'realists' that look at the two governments, both armed with nuclear weapons on their advice: how frustrated is the Vajpayee government that, despite the plentitude of power and strength, it can do nothing to Pakistan. Equally frustrated is Islamabad rulers: despite being world's seventh nuclear power, it can get nothing from India, not even talks. Both have been reduced in impotent rage to name

been noted here that Pakistan's relationship with the US -- the power on which all Pakistani dictators have relied on and on which economic and other reliance has been almost exclusive -- is seriously troubled. Going by American media -- a fairly reliable way to study US policy trends -- even the friendly Bush Administration does not really trust Pakistan, quite like Saudi Arabia.

One of the main reasons why the US does not trust is not because of a few specific lies but because of three big factors: there is the Jihadist mindset that has developed around the Bomb; and Kashmir purpose has generated a Jihad that is seen by India and the US as terrorism; and finally there is the absence of firm, civilised and democratic institutions. US governments love to do business with Pakistani dictators; it is so helpful to their interests. But absence of democracy is nevertheless excoriated, specially because of MDWs presence. Dictators may be useful but they always invite contempt -- only Americans' self-interest hides it in direct dealings.

Anyway, we Pakistanis have to purposefully review the nation's situation. It is to be noted, Pakistan today cannot depend on the friendship of any power in dealing with American anger and India's enmity -- at one and the same time. Not even the Chinese can counteract the possible US mischief. The isolation of the country, especially within the region, is a fact of life. Fundamental security of Pakistani people demands that people should liberate themselves from humbug: what Islamabad's realpolitikwallahs have done has landed the country in a morass from which getting out may be difficult but is still possible.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

PLAIN WORDS

Pakistan today cannot depend on the friendship of any power in dealing with American anger and India's enmity -- at one and the same time. Not even the Chinese can counteract the possible US mischief. The isolation of the country, especially within the region, is a fact of life. Fundamental security of Pakistani people demands that people should liberate themselves from humbug: what Islamabad's realpolitikwallahs have done has landed the country in a morass from which getting out may be difficult but is still possible.

Patels. What one is emphasising is not the poisonous doctrine that some in this country have expounded: Hindus are eternally inimical to the Muslims. Ergo, the only relationship possible with India is eternal enmity. This is rubbish in view of myriad commonalities of religions, cultures and other ethnicities in South Asia -- which is another name for historical India, the political boundaries of which have fluctuated as a result of wars and conquests. But the recent phase of British India's Hindu-Muslim problem from later 1800's onward is a continuing challenge to both Pakistan and India.

The sharp point of it all is the recent statements by Indian government's two most powerful members, the PM and Deputy PM, which said the PM cannot talk to, or visit, Paki-

done to both peoples. In the case of India-Pakistan relations the question of responsibility is complex: Both share the blame. Pakistanis have done as much, if not more, to create trouble for India as the latter has done, albeit more sophisticatedly. The point is the present situation is unsustainable even if there is no war. As for war, it would be an unmitigated evil thanks to nuclear weapons; neither can hope to gain anything while both will sustain unacceptable damage. To talk of a purely conventional war -- with so much asymmetry in strengths and so much nuclearisation having taken place -- is a delusion. One is thankful to even the flawed doctrine of deterrence insofar as it may have actually prevented the fourth war. But that is only a respite. The danger lurks.

than gaining anything. The need today is to realise that the traditional diplomacy was simply going round the mulberry bush, seeking to do down the enemy in talks or in war; there is no point in repeating that. Time has come to make people, all the people, break out of old communal mode of thinking and to give democratic precepts, or indeed rationality, a chance -- with a view to shifting energies from destructive pursuits to doing the maximum, concrete good to the maximum number of Indians by India, and to Pakistanis by Pakistan.

But it has to be sadly realised that the realpolitikwallahs -- the two militaries and foreign policy establishments -- are sure to sneer and use a bagful of invectives for such recommendations; these propositions are supposed to be syrupy

calling, subversion and low tricks. Some realism, that Well, the fact of the matter is that so long as the nuclear weapons sit in India's armouries, no Pakistani decision maker can trust any Indian government and be relaxed enough to concentrate on trade and economy. Similarly, so long as Pakistan's armouries contain nuclear weapons, no Indian government will trust Pakistan. Such mass destruction weapons destroy trust totally and radically. Insofar as India is concerned, one has no business telling it what is good and what is bad. But we in Pakistan have to tackle the problems we face.

It is time we Pakistanis looked at ourselves from the viewpoint of others in order to understand their concerns with a view to doing something rational about them. As has

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Letter from Reporters Sans Frontières

Bangladesh has the good fortune to have a government elected by its people. Yet recent violations of certain human rights, especially press freedom, raise fears that the country's image abroad is being rapidly tarnished.

The crackdown by the authorities on the team from Channel 4, one of the world's most respected TV stations, and on our local correspondent, Saleem Samad, suggest that the government, notably the security services, are trying to hide something that is plain for all to see. That security and freedom are shrinking in Bangladesh.

Reporters Without Borders has been pointing in recent months to the government's lack of willingness to put an end to violence and political intolerance, especially where journalists are the target. This time, the government is trying to forcibly silence those whose job it is to inform the world about a chaotic situation where all manner of political militants, thugs and Islamic fundamentalists are allowed to call the tune.

over the world every year without special visas. This might seem shocking but it is perfectly justified. Why should journalists have to have different visas from other visitors? Why must they be registered, watched or even guided around by government officials when they are reporting in a country? The journalist's visa is a practice left over from the police states of the last century. The Bangladesh authorities simply want to keep the visiting journalists under their control.

Reporters Without Borders has always maintained that while reporters who work with a tourist visa could have in theory be prosecuted, they actually have a moral right to investigate what they want without being watched and harassed by the authorities.

Our organisation supports those who do thorough and independent investigative journalism and refuse to bend to the pressures of the state. The world would have known nothing about the tragedies in Ramallah and Jenin if courageous reporters had not refused, at risk of their lives, to obey the Israeli army's orders to leave those cities. This is also why we defended French reporter Michel Peyrard, who was jailed by

the Taliban for entering Afghanistan under cover.

Is the Bangladesh government trying to imitate the military regime in Burma or the North Korea of Kim Jong-il where it accuses foreign journalists and their assistants of being 'conspirators'?

The authorities talk of a 'conspiracy' to present Bangladesh as a country moving toward Islamic fundamentalism. But foreign journalists who come to Bangladesh seek only to understand the situation and tell the world about it. That is not a conspiracy.

Our local correspondent, Saleem Samad, who has been unjustly and illegally thrown into prison, has always insisted that Bangladesh is a tolerant place. I have known him for several years and I know how much he loves his country and its hard-won freedom. Earlier this year, he told me it was not a land of fanatics but that some political and religious groups were trying to exploit current international tensions to revive communal hatreds.

The Bangladesh government is making a serious mistake by preventing foreign journalists from working in the country.

The arrest of the Channel 4

journalists has been widely reported by the major foreign media. Bangladesh is a country that depends on foreign assistance. What if the international community, especially the European Union, decides to impose political and economic sanctions on Bangladesh because of serious human rights violations, especially of press freedom?

The government of Begum Khaleda Zia should do all it can to steer clear of the path taken by Burma, an outcast state whose leaders are banned from travelling to Europe and which receives no foreign aid. This neighbour of Bangladesh is also a country where journalists are imprisoned and foreign reporters are forced to work under cover of tourist visas.

Robert Ménard
Secretary-General of
Reporters Without Borders
(Reporters Sans Frontières)
Asia - Pacific Desk
Reporters Sans Frontières, Paris

Arrest of Saleem Samad

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free

exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."The First Amendment.

I am appalled and angry at the arrest of Saleem Samad, the representative of Reporters Sans Frontiers in Dhaka. It is a sad day for freedom of speech when journalists are arrested for speaking their minds and charged with sedition.

The government has shown itself to be intolerant. They do fear the printed word and the truth. The person in question was arrested because he helped two fellow journalists look for the truth. This is a blatant violation of Mr. Samad's constitutional rights. I demand that the government release him and the other journalists at once.

Repressing the Fourth Estate will not go down well among us, the right conscious citizens.

Yahya
USA
I have known Mr. Saleem Samad for years. He is a journalist, social worker and human rights activist. He is well known to his associates

and friends alike for his never-ending smile and his sense of humour. His arrest has saddened me greatly.

The Government has brought sedition charge against him. We hope that he can prove that he is not an anti-state element nor has any involvement in anti-state activities. As far as I knew him, he is an outspoken person who loves Bangladesh and its people.

Recently, bringing sedition charge against the journalists be it local or foreign has become really common in our country. What advantage does it give to the government implicating someone with such a charge? However, we are yet to see a single case where someone was found guilty of the charge!

While under police custody, we expect that the rights of Mr. Saleem Samad is not violated. We urge the government to let his lawyer meet him and fight his case.

Understandably his family members are anxious about his health situation and as such. We urge the authorities concerned to allow his family to visit Saleem Samad.

Md. Shahed Ali
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Foreign journalists

Whatever the motive of these two foreigners are, they have come with a fake identity, our respected brothers in UK/Bangladesh is missing this simple point and trying to give it an unnecessary political colour.

These two journalists would have been treated the same way if not worse had they been caught in any developed countries especially UK/USA. It is only because they are caught in Bangladesh so many issues and excuses like freedom of press etc have been raised.

Interestingly Channel 4 is requesting for their release but is not saying that these people were officially sent by them, let alone why they came with false identity.

N.Ghani
Mildura, Australia

UP Elections: an irony

When a law and order drive is going on the time is just right to have a nation wide election. The mischief-mongers are in hiding. Then why can't the Election be held during this particular time?

MAH
Dhaka

Blind supporters

I have been trying to answer a simple question for some time now. I couldn't and unfortunately, I have given up on myself.

Year after year, both of the main political parties, AL and BNP have been using the same tactics, the same "blame game", the same promises, the same lies and the same old pathetic "hartal" to achieve their selfish goal. And surprisingly, when the election comes, millions of brave Bangali "jawns" march like tomadoes, singing those pathetic, self-righteous slogans, showing their support for Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia.

My question was: after so much lies, how do these leaders manage to get so many people behind them?

Now, you are not telling me that those supporters actually believe these leaders when they preach that "if I win, every person in Bangladesh is going to have this and that". Then what is the reason behind this blind support?

Azad Miah
Oldham, UK