

Gripping political tension

Defuse it before it's too late

NATIONAL politics is teetering at the edge of violent confrontation as Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Awami League seem set for a showdown. Hopefully, it will be avoided.

On the back of the surprise February 19 hartal, opposition AL announced an elaborate demonstration programme rounding it off with a call for country-wide shutdown on February 28. BNP is reportedly contemplating counter-measures. When politics goes awry, provocative programmes become order of the day. Processions and counter-processions take place leading to bloodletting clashes.

This is going to be the opposition's fourth general strike in 16 days. The economic loss to the country is incalculable, especially when the crucial RMG sector is bracing up for the post-MFA quota-free regime. The deeply concerned business and trading community in Bangladesh has implored the opposition to look for alternatives to hartal by way of expressing their dissent and resentment against the government.

The development partners have urged the AL to return to Jatiya Sangsad. As a matter of fact, the deteriorating political scenario in Bangladesh has become something of an international concern reflecting on our image. That we must have an auto-operative bipartisan trouble-shooting mechanism has once again been underscored.

More fundamentally, the question that is exercising the minds of the electorate, perhaps without any exception is: why demand the toppling of an elected government which has but only some two years left to its tenure? Why not build public opinion by constitutional methods about the failures of the government and seek the voters' support in the next election? The BNP without denying legitimate space to the opposition could also cultivate the voters. In the process, both the parties can remain dynamic with great service done to democratic values.

All we want is for the AL to eschew the path of hartal and the ruling party to do what it takes to initiate a dialogue.

Air quality in Dhaka

Awareness of the risks is the first step forward

THE recent findings about air quality in the metropolis clearly show the health hazards we are living with. If the pollution monitored in an area like Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban (Parliament House) where traffic congestion is not so bad, is almost twice the admissible level, need we ask more about the situation in other areas of the capital? It's been revealed by the monitoring station that Dhaka's air has a high concentration of mainly carbon monoxide, hydro-carbon, sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxide, and most of these toxic gases are emitted by vehicles, brick kilns and industries'.

We can say without mincing words that the authority has totally failed to prevent unfit vehicles plying on the roads. All the initiative taken last year in this behalf came to naught. By one count, almost 90 per cent of the vehicles running on the city streets are not roadworthy. In fact, all the hopes for a pollution-free, dust-free city came crashing down even after the two stroke 'baby taxis' that was termed as the main cause for the pollution, were taken off the roads. Similarly, the authority also failed to regulate those thousands of brick kilns surrounding the capital. And what about the continuous road digging in the name of beautification and construction sites? The Mahakali rail crossing where a road fly-over is being built is a prime example of the authorities' lack of concern about our health.

Naturally, the city-dwellers have been complaining of respiratory complications. The children are the worst-hit. That is all the more reason for taking immediate steps. Changing the laws or even implementing them will not bring the desired results. No unfit vehicles should be allowed on the roads and those that are irreparable must be ordered out of the streets. Many tend to believe that a large number of public sector transports do need to be phased out. Until we are fully seized of the risks we are facing and prove sincere in our efforts to curb these, no amount of 'massive cleaning programme' will bring the changes we are looking for.

Calling Bush's bluff while Iraq's post-war political fate is being shaped



M ABDUL HAFIZ

AT times, contestation can be so ridiculous that the world's most powerful man has to contend with a rival whom he will take on only with contempt. Look at the equation between the leader of the world's greatest military power, George W. Bush, and the reclusive and unostentatious man who hardly ever ventures out of his seat in Najaf. The difference and disproportion between the two couldn't be more obvious. Yet their paths are on an unavoidable collision course in post-war Iraq.

After Saddam's capture, the Bush administration is in rather a buoyant mood and George Bush is himself striving hard to hammer out a model of democracy which, in his

PERSPECTIVES

All earlier American attempts to subvert or supplant Sistani's enormous political clout as well as their challenges to his authority just petered out. That there are fresh trouble for the US on his account is clear from their attempts to buy more times for handing Iraqis the much awaited political power. The irony with the occupying fakes is this that the sage emerged from the inspired encounters with the Americans every time unscathed and more venerated than before.

vision of democratic Iraq, will become a role model for the entire Arab world. Ironically, however, his vision of democratic Iraq itself is precisely the cause of collision between him and Iraq's Shi'ite leadership, at the helm of which is now a spirited Ayatollah al-Sistani of Najaf's respected and influential religious school, the Hawza Ilimiya. The man commands the unswerving loyalty of the country's Shia majority, refuses to even meet Paul Bremer, and has already forced the American administration in Baghdad to tear up its first political plan for post-war Iraq.

Learning lessons from the imperialistic skullduggery of the past, the Iraqi Shi'ite bitterly knows that Bush's version of democracy (for Iraq) is one that is controlled and contrived to do Washington's

bidding in everything from economic policy to defence to foreign affairs. The seeds of Bush's controlled democracy are embedded in the agreement reached last November 15 between his viceroy Paul Bremer and the puppet Iraqi Governing Council (IGC). The agreement has a hallmark of an American controlled induction of putative democracy in which all the shots will be called by the Americans -- be that from inside Baghdad or from Washington.

The Bremer or Bush blueprint for democracy, for all its hypocrisies, defies the very fundamentals of universally understood democracy, i.e. a government for the people, of the people, and by the people -- in other words -- a representative government. Instead, it speaks of a fundamental law currently being

drafted ostensibly by the IGC, but in reality by the Americans themselves, which would be introduced soon to become the bedrock of Bush-controlled democracy. Bremer has already on occasion boasted that the document will incorporate the high ideals of American democracy, including a bill of rights.

But the law gives no privilege to the Iraqi people to influence what flows from it in any manner. It gives them no right to choose the people who will supposedly draft an interim constitution for Iraq. That right lies with the IGC which, instead of holding an election for the purpose, would select delegates to be sent to the Constituent Assembly. And the same hand-picked assembly will, by the end of the June this year, name a provi-

sional government of Iraq to take over the country's sovereignty from the occupiers.

Obviously George Bush is unprepared to take any chance on elections of any kind that may interfere with the jugglery of dispensing with his brand of democracy in Iraq. Because, that alone would ensure him having his cake in Iraq and eating it too.

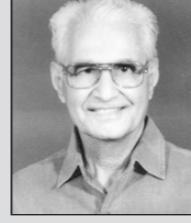
President Bush has reasons to expect that the puppet government designed by him and his war cabal will oblige him by signing up to keep a hundred thousand American troops in Iraq for years to come. The troops will be under the exclusive authority of the US military and act independently of the indigenous Iraqi government to safeguard the vital US interests in the region, and at the same time

will become the kingpin of the wholesale plundering of Iraq's vast mineral assets. The arrangement will also hold the region in the thrall of US military domination.

The plan is hunky-dory indeed! But all these grandiosities are under imminent threat of collapse unless al-Sistani plays the game by Bush's rules. And there are few signs that he will do that; neither can he be made to do that. All earlier American attempts to subvert or supplant Sistani's enormous political clout as well as their challenges to his authority just petered out. That there are fresh trouble for the US on his account is clear from their attempts to buy more times for handing Iraqis the much awaited political power. The irony with the occupying fakes is this that the sage emerged from the inspired encounters with the Americans every time unscathed and more venerated than before. Therein lies his greatest strength and he continues to command absolute sway over Iraq's 65% Shia and is thus a mortal threat to Bush's game plan for post-war Iraq.

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Greater Middle East initiative?



M B NAQVI

writes from Karachi

conduct in the light of various hypotheses. The latter is based on major documents that are authentic. One favours the later course as the safer route.

Also not to be forgotten are the immediate preoccupations of the US. These have their own needs and have to be kept in view. The Americans say they are engaged in a major war on terror. This has led to the military occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq so far. A lot

of Arabs are adding insult to an old festering wound by refusing to end their occupation of the Palestine areas they have occupied through military aggression and where their soldiers are so trigger happy as to cause a daily toll of Palestinian deaths. American governments have admitted this by working for a settlement of Palestinian-Israeli dispute -- the proposed set-

Israels are supposed to be more modern and democratic. Yet, they react to even peaceful protests by an enslaved people with exceptionally brutal violence. Palestinians have understandably taken to violence lately out of impotent rage. The Israeli Army shoots indiscriminately and selectively murders people: men, women and children. It probably thinks it is inflicting shock and awe. Palestinians go mad with anger and take revenge as best as

region.

Going by the documents such as the Project Twentyfirst Century and the annual paper on the strategy of national security, the American objectives do not remain in doubt. The US wants to remain Number One in political, military and economic power, able to project its power on every spot on the globe. It reserves the right to unilateral action wherever and whenever

hopes to somehow contain China while its intentions vis-à-vis Russia remain ambiguous.

Keen American observers have found their country's policies to be about creating a new universal Empire. In the view of what are called Neo-Conservatives it would also be almost holy like the Roman once was. America also claims to stand for freedom and other values. It will be a new kind of imperialism that would be distinct from old colonialisms; it will not occupy any territory or expect any liability or responsibility while achieving its own political and economic aims.

It is therefore necessary to keep these factors in view when examining the Greater Middle East Initiative. If, as is said, it is an extension of the already known American desire for greater democracy in various Arab countries, well, then it should be shown clearly as to what kind of democracy it is going to be. Democrats everywhere would want to know whether the actual autocratic decision-making by the unrepresentative dictators or potentates would survive in the light of the actual empowerment of the masses.

PLAIN WORDS

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of consequential action has to follow. Another element to be remembered is that although there is no reliable definition of terror, to the American mind possible proliferation of nuclear weapons to the states and sub-national groups that are anti-American constitutes the promotion of terror. It has emerged as a major concern in the war against terror. So far not enough attention has been paid to this aspect, certainly in this country.

Americans had let it be known earlier that they are after a big objective in the ME. It was generally understood to be redrawing of Middle East's map. The question arises: what is the need for redrawing the ME map? No clear answer was available, except that the present configuration of states is unsatisfactory from the US viewpoint. But the American interests can be pieced together: The region is unstable: it is ruled by autocratic rulers; their subjects are restive; many of these countries are resource-rich; and most of them are at odds with Israel. It is admitted that the major factor creating instability in the region is the historical Arab-Israeli dispute over

elements were such that Arabs have found them to be based on Israeli desires of retaining as much Palestine land as possible.

The Israeli behaviour shows arrogance and their troops' murderous brutality is making the entire Arab people everywhere angry and unhappy. Israelis have created political conditions in which the actual terrorist groups inexorably emerge and, sure enough, they are active from Morocco to Saudi Arabia. Indeed the process extends into Muslim countries like Turkey, Pakistan, Indonesia, Thailand and Philippines. Israeli occupation has lasted 37 years and shows no sign of ending. The Israelis, not being satisfied with occupying a lot more land in two wars of 1948 and 1967 than was sanctioned by the UN Resolution of 1948, have continued to nibble away at the lands agreed to in the Oslo agreement for the Palestinians by setting up Jewish settlements at widely separated places and then connecting them up with a network of roads which are supposed to remain under Israeli military control for ever. From the Arab point of view this is non-stop daylight murder and robbery by Israel.

they can. That is how suicide bombers have emerged. Aren't there any sober people in Israel who can see the dangerous futility of the tit-for-tat, rather juvenile, cycle of violence?

American diplomacy, of course, claims to aim at stability in the region and promotion of friendly feeling between the Arabs and the Israelis. From the Arab viewpoint, the American conduct so far has been altogether too pro-Israel. Indeed the Americans have adopted the Israeli viewpoint, more or less, as their own. They appear to see through the Israeli eyes. For anyone with a modicum of intelligence, the simple statement of American objectives is too self-righteous and obtuse withal. The pain in the Arab hearts is not appreciated nor is the Israeli behaviour adjudged in accordance with human and democratic values. Therefore it is not difficult to come to the conclusion that the American stated aims should be ignored; what behind the stability they seek is the longer-term objective of making Israel supreme, as a viceroy of America to control the entire

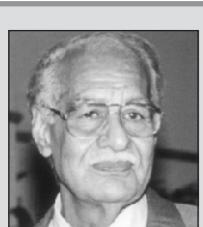
it pleases. Only recently has the US President Bush said that America will never take permission from the UN to wage a war. Insofar as waging wars is concerned, it also specifically reserves the right to make pre-emptive strikes. Its current War on Terror was started by itself after 9/11 with no reference to the UN.

It is now revamping the Middle East map by itself, consulting only trusted friends. European Union, generally speaking, does feel left out. Other major powers look askance at the American behaviour and do not trust the American intentions.

Both friends and foes have in fact concluded that what motivates America is the desire to control the production, transportation and marketing of strategic raw material like oil and a few other resources virtually everywhere; currently the focus is on Central Asia and Northeast Asia in addition to ME. Indeed ME is desired to serve, in this prognostication, as a secure rear base of American military and political power. Moreover it

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CPM speed bump on Vajapayee road



KULDIP NAYAR

writes from New Delhi

INDIAPORE is a ramshackle town in West Bengal. It is still remembered by the revolutionaries of the days gone by. Three White deputy magistrates were killed here during the British period to register anger against foreign rule. Today not many people recall those incidents. Yet, their thinking has been radicalised.

This has given the Communist Party of India (Marxist) an edge over other political parties to entrench itself in the area. Yet what has really deepened its roots has been the land reforms the CPI (M) government has effected -- a ceiling on individual's holdings and, more than that the transfer of land ownership to the tiller. This is where people look to the future -- farmers

West Bengal Chief Minister

affected but the state elections may since the assembly constituencies are small in size and visibly express local sentiments.

In the next Lok Sabha polls, the CPI (M) looks like adding to its present strength of 21. The main reason is that the United Front of Left par-

ties has stayed intact in spite of the fear that it would falter over the allocation of seats. The CPI (M) has also gained due to the erosion of Mamata Banerjee's influence. Her Trinamool Congress has lost ground after the alliance with the BJP and her mercurial temperament has told upon her following.

The Congress could have been a viable opponent of the CPI (M). But the understanding between the two at the national level has poured cold water on the enthusiasm of some old leaders wanting to rein-

pigies. Despite its limitations, the Congress may win some seats in the urban areas, alienated by the CPI (M) years ago when it rubbed the industry on the wrong side to placate the labour force. The middle class was angry and many businesses were taken away from Kolkata. Most party workers still believe that the strategy went awry, not that they were wrong. Such thinking may well be the reason why the party has not been able to grow in the states other than West

tre. The CPI (M) has failed to rope in the Samajwadi Party chief Mulayam Singh Yadav. Yet its effort to get the non-BJP parties on one platform has not been without success. At least the DMK, a constituent of BJP-led National Democratic Alliance, has severed its connection with it.

Many parties have realised that the growth of the BJP is narrowing the space for diversity. What may open the eyes of the NDA constituents is what Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Uma Bharti is doing

to please. Only recently has the US President Bush said that America will never take permission from the UN to wage a war. Insofar as waging wars is concerned, it also specifically reserves the right to make pre-emptive strikes. Its current War on Terror was started by itself after 9/11 with no reference to the UN.

The BJP has, however, done the impossible: devaluing the Nehru-Indira Gandhi dynastic factor. One great grandson of Jawaharlal Nehru has joined the BJP. The other two, Priyanka and Rahul, have not set the

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resentment over the waste of public funds which they wish could have been spent on their betterment. They are extremely poor, neglected and facing the crunch of unemployment. They still are out in the cold and pray "India Shining" could come true some day.

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They have praised Vajapayee because of the improved relations with Pakistan. But they have disliked his initiation of the poll campaign from the Ayodhya trial. The same Kalyan Singh who was UP chief minister when the Babri Masjid was demolished is not only back in the BJP but reiterates that the temple will be built on the disputed site.

The biggest disappointment is that of the lower half which does not "feel good" despite the expansive advertisements.

In fact, there is

vigorate the Congress. Their age is not so much a factor as is their infighting. The party does not have a person of stature to guide. Once it was led by people like Bidhan Chandra Roy, Atulya Ghosh and recently by Siddhartha Shankar Ray. The present leadership is that of

Bengal, Tripura and Kerala. The party won a total of 33 in the three states in the last general election. It may tally more this time.

In the Hindi-speaking areas, its role is confined to building a viable front against the BJP to stop it from coming to power at the Cen-

tral -- converting the state into a Hindutva fiefdom under the RSS control. A few other allies of the BJP have been disillusioned following the Supreme Court's intervention in Gujarat where the state high court had let off the 22 accused in the Best Bakery mas-

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BETWEEN THE LINES

One great grandson of Jawaharlal Nehru has joined the BJP. The other two, Priyanka and Rahul, have not set the Yamuna on fire by becoming Congress members. It is a refreshing development because the pull of the dynasty at one time tilted the scales. There may yet be emotional response in a few constituencies in UP. Strange, people in Midnapore seldom talk about the dynasty. Their complaint is that the CPI (M) cadre is too overbearing.