

Hawa Bhaban-Sudha Bhaban face-off

A recipe for disaster both sides should shun

WE look with great trepidation at the BNP threat to lay a siege on Sudha Bhaban, the residence of opposition leader Sheikh Hasina, as a measure to counter the AL's declared plan to do the same around Hawa Bhaban on April 21. It's a dangerous brew that is cooking. We have been through other close calls to showdowns between the two sides with their incurable fiesta for brinkmanship; but by God, this is the one in prospect that is brisling with imminent danger of an unprecedented scale.

Just the AL threat to march on Hawa Bhaban was itself a potent invitation to trouble. Likewise, if the BNP's plan to *gherao* the Sudha Bhaban had not been contingent upon the AL's programme for laying siege on Hawa Bhaban that by itself would have spelled danger as well. But now their respective plans to stage the programmes on the same day and that too around extremely sensitive locations doubles the danger in no unmistakable terms.

Hawa Bhaban is a BNP party office dating back to election days, but Sudha Bhaban is the private residence of Sheikh Hasina, who happens to be leader of the opposition at the moment. A party house and a residence cannot be equated with each other, not even for the purposes of political gamesmanship. Politics has become so debased and bankrupt that means have become all important at the cost of the ends. Therefore, what gives a promise of quick result, even if an illusion of it, however desperate and abominable the method maybe, is quickly embraced.

Hawa Bhaban has been a subject of controversy. The AL could highlight it without taking recourse to laying a siege on it which gave the ruling party an excuse to adopt a counter-measure. True, the sanctity of a residence shouldn't be a fodder for politics. Even so, AL should show the maturity of exercising the public mind on Hawa Bhaban without breathing fire to *gherao* it which is fraught with the danger of the BNP staging a showdown. All this will lead to direct clashes and mounting violence accompanied by loss of lives. What happens in Dhaka could be a trend-setter for the rest of the country with violence engulfing perhaps the houses and installations of mutually inimical political leaders. As we have said before, so are we saying now that dialogue is the only way out; and the expectation of ultimate maturity rests with the ruling party to make it possible.

Iraq turns more volatile

US tactics reminder of Vietnam error

SITUATION in Iraq is rapidly deteriorating. Armed clashes between the Iraqis and the allied troops are commonplace. An increasing number of masked gunmen, mainly youths, can be seen fighting the US troops. And, now, with foreigners having been taken hostage by a hitherto unknown Iraqi group, a new tactic is being played out by the guerillas demanding withdrawal of US troops under specified deadlines. It smacked of Lebanese imbroglia. One year since the fall of Saddam Hussein, even the mood among the 'liberators' has soured, let alone that of the so-called liberated.

The excessive use of force by the US-led coalition forces in handling the current situation has drawn the flak of even the American-sponsored governing council. The Americans are obviously hard put to explain to the world how they could resolve the latest crisis without any more bloodshed after what they have done in Falluja. Though majority of the Shias are not followers of Moqtada Sadr, the cleric now being hunted by the US troops, almost all of them resent the way Americans are trying to catch him or his supporters. Seizing a whole town and then bombing it would never get them any support of common Iraqis.

The Americans didn't have to use force, they chose to do it. Now, the US decision for troops reinforcement in Iraq is somewhat indicative of dipping their toes in troubled waters like in Vietnam war. The US must realise that use of force can not bring the desired result; it, in fact, may end up dividing the allies of the war. Though Japan has strongly maintained its commitment not to withdraw its troops from Iraq as demanded by those who took some of their citizens hostage, it's difficult to say how long she can withstand domestic pressures.

Negotiations with the groups fighting in Falluja have not produced any positive outcome. Therefore, we say again that there is still time for the US to reevaluate and rethink the situation so that they can extricate themselves before it is too late from what looks like another dip in a quicksand.

The travails of a non-NATO ally



M ABDUL HAFIZ

BY making a caricature of Saddam Hussain's physical apprehension last December and consigning even earlier his Bathist set-up to history Washington's neo-conservatives could indeed boost the incumbent President's election prospects. Now caught up in a tangle of growing debate over the seeming lies the administration resorted to justify its Iraq invasion Bush finds those prospects largely diminished. The White House ideologues promoting the Bush presidency are thus on a look out for a quick trophy to provide fresh boost to Bush's chances for reelection.

Iraq was indeed chosen for the purpose a year ago as the US' first war on terror in Afghanistan lacked befitting target to take the full blast of the US' revolutionised military technology. Thanks to Saddam Hussain's authoritarianism combined with his narcissism Iraq had plenty of them. With the Arab world's most modern state and a moderately industrialised Iraq lying pulverised after a few weeks' pounding of its infrastructure, the Anglo-American invaders couldn't but produce an effect of 'shock and awe'. It only helped raising the curve

of Bush's approval rating. In an anti-climax a year later, Iraq is an albatross around the invaders' neck. They do not know how to cast it off; neither can they swallow it up.

The country's Shia majority has now closed ranks with the guerillas of Sunni triangle -- known for their loyalty to Saddam -- and the secular Bathists blended with al-Qaeda militants allegedly infiltrating across Iraq's porous border to put up a nationalistic resistance and give a bloody nose to the occupation forces. The anti-American violence

In this bleak hour Washington has refocused its attention on Afghanistan where in the wilderness of its border with Pakistan general Pervez Musharraf, the US' trusted ally, is desperately fighting a losing battle with an assorted lot of Taliban and al-Qaeda fugitives. Close in the heels of this war being fought at the US' behest one of the Washington's extraordinary gestures appears from the blue to cheer up an embattled general engaged in hunting down a high value target -- a trophy to be presented to the war cabal in

has been faithfully doing as frontline state since the war on terror had started in Afghanistan in 2001. It is therefore little more than wage for the services rendered by Pakistan.

May that be so, the timing of both the bestowal of the status and the dangling of aid package have been cleverly contrived to enthrone Pakistan to 'do more on the warfront taking care of al-Qaeda and Taliban big shots in Pakistan's tribal belt which they are reported to be hiding. However, a military operation of this nature in semi-autonomous tribal

heavy casualties first on the frontier constabulary and then on the regulars. And the 'high value target' remained as elusive as before.

However the prospect of renewed flow of military and economic aid from the US has, of course, pleased the Pakistanis who nevertheless sorely recall that such thing was of no consequence in the past and squandered away by the vested interests. With regard to the status of major non-NATO ally the reactions are mixed. While President Musharraf's main constituency,

year the Americans couldn't care less what happens to a time-tested tribal tradition or its social fabric. They are in quest of a quick trophy -- that too before the presidential election of November next.

Pakistanis are still trying to understand what practical benefit the newly bestowed status would accrue to them except they are only aware that it is symbolic in character equating Pakistan with about dozen of US' major non-NATO allies like Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Thailand, Argentina and so on. They are also painfully aware that the asset of some of other such countries is indeed their own inherent strength: political, economic and industrial. How much an agrarian and backward Pakistan will fit in that exclusive club is something to be seen later. In the meantime Indo-Pak peace process to which hinges the country's real progress and prosperity is at stake.

India which initiated a reconciliation process recently with Pakistan only recently appears to have been somewhat rattled by the US' decision to bestow the status of a major non-NATO ally on Pakistan. Vajpayee who took pride just a couple of months ago in fostering strategic relations with the US is embarrassed by the US' decision during the election time in India. It is yet not known if the development will have any negative impact on Indo-Pak peace process. If it does it will offset all the benefits offered by the US to Pakistan while conferring on her the new status. There cannot be any alternative to peace and the benefits it brings about.

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PERSPECTIVES

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has erupted across the whole country particularly by the Shias loyal to firebrand cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr, after the closure of newspaper published by him. The intensity of the opposition to the occupation forces has not only led to the widescale killings of Iraqis in reprisal, it has also steadily increased the American casualties compelling the occupiers to rethink their strategy and need for reinforcements. Paul Bremer, Iraq's American ruler, has admitted that things were not going favourably for handing over sovereignty to the Iraqis by 30 June. Meantime, the coalition is also about to crumble after at least new government of Spain announcing its intention to pull back the troops from Iraq.

Bush White House.

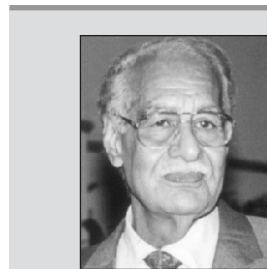
The US has been particularly generous in awarding Pakistan a major non-NATO ally status and within a week of this move decided to lift democracy-related sanction imposed on Pakistan in the wake of military take over of 1999. The decision clears the way for Pakistan to receive America's military and economic aid worth millions of dollars. By the end of current-fiscal year Islamabad will have received \$390m while the amount for the next year has been increased to \$701m. This is part of five-year three-billion dollar military and economic package promised to Pakistan in Camp David last year. However, to most Pakistanis this is long expected from the US whose bidding Pakistan

belt where anti-US sentiments run high is both risky and unpopular. Pakistan's religious political parties already resented the operation and Musharraf himself escaped several attempts on his life. Not only that. It was an embarrassment when after hyping up the operation by none other than Musharraf himself hinting that Ayman Zawahiri, the deputy to bin Laden was finally trapped by Pakistan Army in the wilderness of South Waziristan. The expedition did not yield anything. Even the CNN anchorman's suggestion that fierce resistance received from the militants pointed to the presence of a 'high value target' in their midst proved false. The embarrassment was total when the trapped militia inflicted, instead of surrendering,

the military in Pakistan, is happy over it for it holds out the prospect of increased military interaction and cooperation. It however draws flak from the political front, particularly the MMA which has been decrying such relation with the US.

Under the US' pressure on Pakistan's military the tribal traditions are already under strain. Since the British days the tribals were allowed full internal autonomy in return of the tribals' nominal allegiance. This system served the British well for a century and the Pakistanis since 1947. Now under non-NATO ally status Pakistan is obliged to do series of dirty jobs at the US' behest including military operation in an exclusive area. After paying an odd \$300 million a

Election sans issues



KULDEEP NAYYAR
writes from New Delhi

WHEN the result of the first survey was published it gave the BJP and its allies more than 300 seats in the 545-member Lok Sabha Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee told the editor of a south Indian daily that it was "a bit exaggerated." Truly speaking, the surveys should be taken with a pinch of salt. The political parties have begun their propaganda only now. Electoral campaigns are taking off. The candidates or their representatives are knocking at the door of the voters at this time. Any guess will be hazardous.

The BJP has, however, an advantage. Its mentor, the RSS, has a large parivarthe Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the Bajrang Dal, the Akhil Bhartiya Vidhyarthi Parishad and Swadeshi Jagran Manch. All are working for the party at different levels. The Sangh is also using its newly constituted cadre in the tribal areas. And the faces, which have come to be recognised throughout India, are far more in the BJP than those in the Congress. Doordarshan, AIR and the BJP-inclined media have projected the relatively unknown BJP members. The BJP has still another advantage: the buck stops at the RSS. It is

the undisputed boss. It builds up leaders in different organisations and rotates them. For example, it has some 25 per cent of its sanchalaks (preachers) as members in the assemblies in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. Among the Lok Sabha candidates, the tally is more or less the same.

The Congress, on the other hand, does not have even offices in many cities. Over the years, it has also lost in the countryside its cadre which

Indira Gandhi's period was the worst. She saw to it that she remained supreme and went even to the extent of splitting the Congress when she found her leadership challenged. No doubt, she succeeded but the party stopped distinguishing right from wrong and moral from immoral.

Sonia Gandhi is a late starter both in politics and the party. Things developed in the Congress in such a way that she became a meeting point of different factions. She was

during her campaign. But the fact that she is not a candidate will stand her in good stead if and when the Congress does not do well at the polls. Knives will be out then as it happened in 1977 when Indira Gandhi was swept out of power. Priyanka may come in handy at that time. Surveys show Vajpayee far ahead of Sonia Gandhi. This is natural because his stature has gone up after New Delhi's breakthrough with Islamabad. But he and his party may fritter away the advan-

not in power?" This was the refrain of people's comments. The BJP may be a victim of an 'overkill' campaign if it continues to pursue Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin.

But then the BJP has no other issue to project. Development gives a feel-good factor only to the developed areas and the middle class which hardly goes to the polling booth. Very little has reached the most vulnerable and marginalised groups the children, the homeless, the landless and the disadvan-

selection. Since public life outside the legislatures has ceased to get attention, everyone who wants to stay in the limelight is making a beeline to politics. On the other hand, parties have converted elections into a farce. It is also true that power has so got much concentrated in parliament and assemblies that no change looks possible from outside. After Jayaprakash Narayan's movement in 1975, no struggle has evoked response beyond a particular area or state. Despite a large number of the unemployed, people are not coming to the streets. Their economic conditions may not be good but they would rather queue up before polling booths than resort to any other method.

In the circumstances, the best thing that could have happened is the formation of People's Political Front (PPF). Human rights activists, civil liberty supporters and others involved in people's struggles have come together to initiate a process of value-based politics and to raise genuine concerns of the electorate. The front has announced that it will fight against "communal, corrupt and corporatised" forces. It is like the movement of Greens in Europe, committed to principles... There is yet no survey to assess the strength of the PPF.

There is yet no survey to assess the strength of the PPF. But who knows it may provide one day an alternative to the country. The voters are now beginning to look beyond the two main parties. They increasingly feel that the BJP is getting congressised and the Congress saffronised. The PPF may harness the disillusionment.

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BETWEEN THE LINES

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was its mainstay. The president counts for everything. This has stunted the growth of leaders. Even Jawaharlal Nehru was blamed for not letting anyone come up. During his lifetime, SK Patil, a Congress leader from Maharashtra, said: "Nehru was like a banyan tree which gave protection but nothing grew beneath." Still during Nehru's time there were leaders like Lal Bahadur Shastri, Rafi Ahmed Kidwai, K Kamaraj and Morarji Desai who were well known. After Shastri's untimely death, small men pretending to be radicals came to dominate the Congress. That was the time when the lack of ideology and infighting began to consume the party.

always there behind the scenes but she waited for the right time to come. Whether Sonia Gandhi was catapulted to the position because she was Rajiv Gandhi's wife is not relevant. She is the only crowd puller in the Congress. Like her mother-in-law, she has seen to it that there is no rival to her in the party. The two leaders, Madhavrao Scindia and Rajesh Pilot, who could have challenged her, died in accidents a few years ago.

However, Sonia Gandhi did well in not fielding Priyanka, her daughter. It would have been putting all eggs in one basket. Rahul, Sonia Gandhi's son, is there but he is not making waves. Priyanka has charismatic qualities which she will utilise

tage if they continue to harp on Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin. The 'fatigue factor' is coming into play. Definitely, it is not a trump card any more. Many people have begun saying: "All are after this poor woman." If this feeling spreads, the Sangh parivar will have a problem at its hands. I have seen such a thing happening before.

After the emergency, Indira Gandhi was indicted for the excesses she had committed. But when people saw her trial before the Shah Commission for months, day in and day out, at Doordarshan and heard about the proceedings, a feeling of sympathy began to build up in her favour. "Why are they after the poor woman even when she is

tagged castes. The election seems to be without any issue. All political parties, except those on the left, are talking more or less about the same thing: globalisation. In fact, the quarrel that has erupted between the BJP and the Congress is who had taken the initiative. On foreign policy, even the communists do not seem to have any difference with the BJP. It too criticises America at times and has the Indo-Pak relations on the track.

What may matter in the coming election is the quality of candidates. I do not think any party has paid serious attention to that. There was a long queue at the door of every party office for tickets. Proximity and money seem to have counted in the

OPINION

Contemplating political reforms

JALAL ALAMGIR

THE way things are, the answer cannot be a simple "yes" or "no". We need to think hard about reforming our autocratic parties as well as our struggling parliamentary process. Without fundamental changes, holding another round of elections, demanded uncompromisingly by the opposition, will remain merely a procedural and cosmetic achievement. We will have addressed some symptoms but not eradicated the disease. The point of departure is within the parties themselves.

Steps 1 to 5: Our party system

(1) Ensure intra-party democracy. The major political parties must elect all of their leaders with a clear democratic method. Our main parties organise national conventions, but they are irregular, and used mostly to rubberstamp leaders pre-selected through both direct pressure and indirect "emotional" politics. Parties must hold fair elections on a regular basis.

(2) Party leadership must rotate. North Korea's "Great Leader" Kim Il-Sung, long dead, nevertheless continues to hold the post of President, which has been bequeathed permanently to him. Our political culture hovers

around similar cults of personality. Virtually all parties in Bangladesh are beholden to a few permanent leaders. If they are committed to democracy, parties must ensure that there is a limit on leadership term, perhaps three terms as a generous maximum. Otherwise, parties will perpetuate the same mistaken worldviews and habits.

(3) Party MP candidates must be elected by local constituencies. In most parties, MP candidates are nominated, not elected. This process limits challenges to party leadership and rewards loyalty over merit. Parties must allow the local constituencies to elect their MP candidates. Whether it is formalised like American primaries or not is up to each party, but for representative democracy to work, local leaders must be allowed to compete fairly and rise up. Nomination is not democracy.

(4) MP candidates must not run in multiple constituencies. Our top party leaders typically compete for three to five seats. This not only stifles local voice but presupposes that local candidates are not good enough, a condescending viewpoint given to us by Britain, where, not surprisingly, most legislation introduced by "commoners" need approval by Lords. Whether we do it formally by amending the election laws or

informally on the basis of agreement, abolishing this rule will ensure greater local competition and more focus on part of each candidate on doing the best he/she can for the constituency.

(5) Voting across party lines must be allowed in parliament. This is the single biggest drawback to the Westminster-style parliamentary system we have established. Our MPs cannot vote against their party, which reduces the parliamentary process to that of a glorified debating club. The rule favours loyalty over merit and the interests of central leadership over that of local constituencies. In an effective democracy, MPs are elected by local constituencies to represent their interests in national affairs. When their genuine representation rights are stripped, they are forced to find alternative ways of expression. Allowing vote across party lines would make the parties more careful and serious about resolving both intra-party and national issues, as they would always be in fear of defection or "crossing the floor." Moreover, if voting across lines were allowed, we would have been used to democratic defection, and possibly avoided the type of autocratic violence that BNP orchestrated recently against renegade MP Mr. M. A. Mannan.

Steps 6 to 10: Political rewards and punishment

(6) Restrict ministries to 10 percent of legislature. The current BNP government set out in 2001 with a gargantuan 60-member cabinet. Facing stiff criticism, it was later reduced: 53 senior and junior ministers oversaw 38 ministries. How have our traditionally large governments fared? In a recent World Bank survey of governance in South Asia, we have ranked toward the bottom of all South Asian countries in both governmental effectiveness and regulatory quality, which are the main areas of responsibility of the cabinet. The only country we managed to outclass is war-ravaged Afghanistan. Add to that Transparency International's rating of us being the most corrupt country in the world, along with the rampant abuses of law, and what we have is a dismal failure of governance. Does our economy require a large cabinet? Hardly. Eastern Europe underwent massive economic changes in the 1990s, transitioning from socialism to capitalism. East European countries with a parliamentary system managed that transition with an average cabinet size of 16. Those with a presidential system had an average cabinet size of 18. Vladimir Putin directs the turbulent Russian economy and polity with a cabinet of 17 ministers.

Governmental effectiveness aside, our cabinet is large purely from a public funds perspective. In this vein, the Public Expenditure Review Commission (PERC) recommend last year that our number of ministries be cut down to 22. In our corrupt system of political rewards, however, downsizing cannot be done simply on the basis of goodwill. We should think about a legally enforced upper limit. Such limits have been effective in other countries. Thailand has a constitutional limit on the number of ministries. Belize, where the legislature has merely 29 seats, is also thinking about a cap on cabinet size. In India, where the obesity in cabinet size especially in state governments has reached epidemic proportions, a vigorous debate is taking place on a proposal to limit the number of ministers to 10 percent of legislative strength. In Bangladesh, such a limit will still yield a cabinet of 30 to 33, which seems a good compromise between PERC's streamline view and our helpless dependence on a large, ubiquitous government.

(7) Subject the home minister nominee to parliamentary approval. In our political system, the party (or coalition) that forms the government is free to appoint whoever they choose as ministers, provided at least 90 percent of them are MPs. The appointees are

not subject to parliamentary scrutiny. However, given how state resources (such as the police) are routinely used to harass the opposition, the Home Minister has special responsibility to act impartially, in the interest of the state rather than the party. Our record here is dismal: the home ministry has been given out usually to either a party zealot or an ex-military man, both of which has tended to intensify autocracy. By making this appointment subject to parliamentary approval, we might encounter some unpleasant debates and delays initially, but we will end up selecting a minister who is somewhat acceptable by the opposition. Trying to appoint a completely impartial home minister is a fool's errand, but just the hurdle of a parliamentary approval will ensure that the governing party thinks twice about its nomination.

(8) Abolish the positions of state minister and deputy minister. These positions are unnecessary, and used either to reward young party members that are intimate with top party leaders or, conversely, to punish rising members for whom a full cabinet position might be a threat to the party leadership. These methods are reminiscent of autocracy. If the party reforms noted above are implemented (intra-party democracy, leadership changes, etc.), such

rewards will no longer be necessary, saving public funds and releasing at least some members of our over-burdened police from their daily motorcade escort duties. It will also allow a single minister to work closely with a single secretary, and we will have avoided some of the ugly internecine divisions between senior and junior ministers inhabiting the same ministry.

(9) Abolish the Anti-Corruption Bureau. This Bureau, established initially with good intentions, has become a joke. Operated straight out of the Prime Minister's office, the Bureau is one of the main weapons in the government's arsenal to harass opposition politicians. Its operations are like clockwork: whenever a new government comes to power, the Bureau magically drops existing cases against members of the government and pursues new cases or re-opens old ones against members of the opposition. Meanwhile, corruption continues. This Bureau is just a solid waste of public fund.

(10) Use the army with judicial oversight to remove arms. An attempt at the withdrawal of massive quantities of arms spread by our major parties cannot be successful as long as the parties themselves remain autocratic in nature. Once parties operate

democratically, both internally and externally, their encouragement of violence will naturally diminish. It is at that point that we must undertake another nationwide arms recovery drive, in conjunction with an arms-for-money programme. The only organisation capable of orchestrating this drive is the army. Under a democracy, however, a magistrate or some other representative of the judiciary must accompany the local deployment of the army. Their goal will not be to guide army commanders, but simply to note possible violations of human rights.

It is obvious that these are fundamental and difficult changes. Some of them, like cross-party voting, have to entail constitutional amendments, like the ones that established a caretaker government. Some others, like an arms recovery drive, can be done within existing laws. Still others involve changing procedural rules within the major parties. Regardless of the means, we must begin to debate, absorb and agree to fundamental political reforms. They are badly needed, and the sooner, the better.

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