

## Municipality polls

*Let these be free and fair*

THE elections to 117 municipalities in 50 districts get underway today amidst great enthusiasm and high expectation among the electorate. Though the polls are not taking place in all the 64 districts of the country, they nevertheless represent a huge electoral exercise concerning a very important local government tier. The process aimed at strengthening democracy by devolving decision-making powers on to local levels is a crucial part of democratic institutionalisation.

These elections are not fought on party tickets; yet the notion that party colour plays a significant role in them can't be ruled out. Although the positioning on local issues and power relationships are factors that influence the voting pattern, party loyalties as well tend to figure in the shaping of an electoral verdict. So, attempts at interference and intimidation cannot be wished away.

Some election monitoring outfits had alleged in the pre-election phase that many candidates were 'violating election rules'. According to Fema, 'In some areas of the country voters belonging to the minority community' were being 'intimidated'. These are the reports that the Election Commission and the government administration must take into account as the elections are conducted over the next six days. The onus lies on the political parties, more so on the ruling party to see that the elections pass off peacefully. Free, fair and peaceful elections would earn credit for the government.

The Chief Election Commissioner had termed 43 pourashavas 'risk-prone' in placing a request with the government for army deployment. But the latter insisted that these are local elections and that the BDR, Ansar and extra police force being made available for election duty should suffice. Only the next few days can tell whether the approach was right. BNP secretary-general and LGRD minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan has reportedly given a word on behalf of the government that from their side nothing would be done to influence the vote. We would like to pin hopes on his assurances. In any case, all efforts must be made to stave off intimidation and violence in the electoral process.

One of the most positive aspects of this election is the huge number of woman candidates taking part in the election. It's a sign that re-enforces our belief in equal opportunities even more. We simply hope, the election will be another step forward towards consolidating democracy from the local level, if it is held with efficiency and transparency.

## Torture of Iraqi prisoners

*Mere reprimand is not enough*

RECENTLY the world was treated to a most despicable spectacle of human degradation and moral depravity through the pictures depicting the brutalisation of Iraqi prisoners held at the notorious Abu Gharib prison, by the US forces.

Those that brought these appalling pictures of torture and depravity to light, by way of these photographs, deserve our thanks. But for their efforts, the world would have been totally unaware of the inhuman treatments meted out by the US-British captors on the Iraqi prisoners. These pictures have confirmed something that was a common apprehension in the minds of many.

One has difficulty in coping with the fact that these acts have been perpetrated by soldiers of a country which prides in vaunting its love for human rights, while picking on other nations that they consider lacking respect for the same.

While it is easy to explain away the whole episode as, 'actions of the few tarnishing image of the many,' it nonetheless demonstrates the low level of depravity that the occupation forces have stooped to, and the disdain they hold for those they are supposed to have delivered from an oppressive regime. And that all these happened without the knowledge of the local commander, if we are to take her words as true, expose the abysmal lack of control of subordinates by the superior officers.

While the charges are being examined by the military equivalent of a grand jury, and six senior US officers have already been reprimanded, a transparent trial of those that are responsible for such acts, is in order. It is necessary, not only for the sake of justice but also for retrieving whatever is left of the US-British coalition image in Iraq.

# The global war on terror: Who's winning?



M ABDUL HAFIZ

OVER last several weeks there have been enough developments for both sides in the war to think that al-Qaeda might be winning it, after all. The evidences abound that even with al-Qaeda's leaders on the run the terrorist threats are evolving and getting scarier. Madrid mayhem is a pointer. Though there is no iron-clad evidence, there is plenty of speculations that those who were caught in connection with the train blasts worked for al-Qaeda in the past. Much of Europe was already known to be logistical base for Islamic militants. Madrid bombing suggests that now it is also theatre of operation.

Even if Saddam Hussain now languishes in US custody -- more than two years after the fall of Kabul Americans have no clue where bin Laden is and al-Qaeda cells keep issuing audio tapes calling for Jihad. One issued a month ago took credit for Madrid train blasts. Another issued a fortnight earlier in the name of al Jawahiri called for the overthrow of Pakistan's Pervez Musharraf who launched controversial Wana operation in the country's tribal belt at America's behest. As for Taliban most of its leaders including

their one-eyed chief Molla Omar are still at large. Nor has al-Qaeda's leadership structure been compromised. The most critical of the developments has however been the confirmation of what many had long suspected: "President Bush has made a complete hash of the battle against the Jihadis."

An American response to terrorist threat of al-Qaeda variety was always perfunctory. It was only after the US' embassy bombing in East-Africa that Bill Clinton ordered firing

things: to remove the only potential hindrance to zealots' aspiration of greater Israel. President Bush, a born-again Christian, and his team comprised of evangelicals and Christian Right proved credulous enough to buy the neo-con recipe -- an invasion of Iraq. As revealed in his testimony before 11 September Enquiry Commission Richard Clarke, the counter terrorism chief of National Security staff, stated that al-Qaeda threat sounded by him then vanished like bubble and Iraq,

Trade Centre attack to pursue his own agenda. Clarke says that the counter terrorism officials were asked repeatedly to find any evidence that linked Saddam Hussain to 9/11 attacks. Bush's principal occupation was then to find an excuse to invade Iraq.

Of course, the architects of Iraq invasion were also solidly behind the president. According to Clarke he was rebuffed by Paul Wolfowitz, the deputy secretary of defence, when the former tried to focus on al-

the real threat, elsewhere.

However, as a result of the prevailing perception in the US the al-Qaeda's possible role in 9/11 attacks and its potentials remained obfuscated from the full view of the administration. Also with the shift of the battle front in the war on terror Osama's outfit was given a new lease of life in the wilderness of Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The US' anti-terror policy also afforded al-Qaeda a field day it needed so badly to reorganise and re-equip

The ascendancy of al-Qaeda becomes all too clear when every western official now concedes that in the aftermath of the horrific Madrid attacks the Islamic terrorists have the will and capability to strike at more western capitals in the months ahead. Such attacks are now regarded as virtual certainty. Even with Iraq under occupation it is hard to see that Iraq invasion has helped make the world a safer place. Neither has an occupied Iraq proved any safe place even for the occupation forces. In the month of April alone 120 American G-1s were killed in anti-US uprising.

The world knows by now that the US' claim of WMDs in Saddam's Iraq was a hoax. Even Saddam was a secular tyrant who kept the Jihadist at bay, the new Iraq has become the breeding ground of every Islamic extremist group in the world. Should the Americans impose genuine democracy in Iraq it will then perhaps pass to Khomeini-style Shia cleric because of the country's Shia-majority population. And if they do not do that fighters from all over Middle East and North Africa are already flowing into Iraq to fight Jihad against American occupiers.

Still worse is the perception that the invasion of Iraq was an unjustified act of aggression. It has hardened anti-American sentiment throughout the Muslim world. Far from making the world a safer place the Iraq invasion has actually helped create an environment in which Islamic extremism can thrive. It has, in fact, been George W. Bush's gift to al-Qaeda which again seems to be riding the crest of the waves in a vast swath stretching from Pakistan to Europe to Iraq.

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

## PERSPECTIVES

That the invasion of Iraq was an unjustified act of aggression. It has hardened anti-American sentiment throughout the Muslim world. Far from making the world a safer place the Iraq invasion has actually helped create an environment in which Islamic extremism can thrive. It has, in fact, been George W. Bush's gift to al-Qaeda which again seems to be riding the crest of the waves in a vast swath stretching from Pakistan to Europe to Iraq.

of a few cruise missiles at the suspected hideouts of Bin Laden in Sudan and Afghanistan. Bush administration considered them ineffective and therefore preferred a new approach. Such as invasion of Afghanistan. The adventure led the US to another disquieting development in the battle against al-Qaeda. The US 'liberated' Afghanistan using the soldiers of Northern Alliance and an assorted warlords as mercenaries and risked few American lives. When a pliant Hamid Karzai was installed as ruler of 'new Afghanistan' the US lost interest and moved on to Iraq.

In fact, Iraq was central to the agenda of neocon ideologues behind Bush administration. They assiduously laboured to co-opt the top man to back their scheme of

the oil-rich strategic hub of Middle East, floated in the imagination of those supporting the invasion. Henceforth, the new president paid only erratic attention to al-Qaeda.

As portrayed by Clarke both in his testimony and in his book 'Against All Enemies' Bush White House was totally nonchalant to al-Qaeda threats before 9/11 in spite of being adequately forewarned and then obsessed with punishing Iraq regardless of what the evidence showed about Saddam's al-Qaeda ties or lack of them. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11 the mood was that of revenge and President Bush like any other American looked for someone to shoot at.

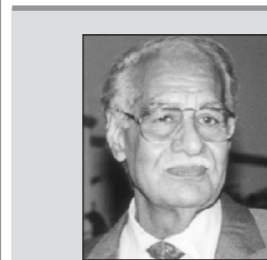
Even if the warning of an impending terrorist threat was aptly vindicated Bush tried to use the World

convened in April 2001 to discuss terrorism. To Wolfowitz a little terrorist in Afghanistan was a much lesser threat than a state-sponsored terrorism orchestrated by Saddam. Ronald Rumsfeld, the defence secretary, also argued at a cabinet meeting that Afghanistan, the home of Osama's terrorist camp, did not offer "enough good targets. We should do Iraq," Bush himself wanted FBI and CIA to hunt for any evidence that would point to the involvement of Iraqi strongman. Many opinion polls demonstrated that a huge proportion of Americans genuinely believe that Saddam was behind 9/11. Although there is no evidence to that effect, Bush White House successfully sold the lie thus deflecting Americans' attention from

itself. Thanks to the US' obsession with Iraq al-Qaeda seems to have already made good of the losses it suffered in Afghanistan and reorganised globally to be able to strike afresh. They could not be dislodged from their seeming new sanctuary in Pakistan's inaccessible tribal areas bordering Afghanistan.

So elusive is the terror threat today -- so deeply burrowed in the globe's darkest crannies -- that even a wily old commander like Pervez Musharraf seemed non-plussed about what exact targets his soldiers were engaging in South Waziristan last month. While his 'high value target' conveniently slipped away from the cordon the Pakistani troops formed, a fierce resistance of the militants could turn the operation a fiasco.

## Still polls apart



KULDIP NAYYAR  
writes from New Delhi

PRIME Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee underlines the obvious when he says that new political alignments cannot be ruled out. After having lost the support of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu, the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) in Haryana and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in UP, he is left with no choice. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) has already lost the majority in the lower house. Its strength of 304 is not even 270 in the 545-member Lok Sabha. If he wants to return to power, he has to look for the support of other political parties, however opposed to him and the BJP.

How many more members Vajpayee would require to form the government is difficult to say at present. His own party, the BJP, does not look like crossing the present tally of 182 seats. Even if it does by a few seats, it is going to be tough to reach the magic figure of 273. This is what any party requires to get the invitation from the President. That the constituents of the NDA are losing more than the BJP can be of little solace to Vajpayee. The overall strength of the coalition is lessening.

The BJP may have to woo individuals and the two-three member parties. It means coming down from the pedestal on which the party has been sitting for the last six years. Vajpayee's anguish over having led the 24 parties of different hues is understandable. But it is bound to increase because his wish for "a compact coalition" does not seem to be coming true. His task would become easier if the BJP were to get around 200. But there is a big 'if' when one sees the results of the exit polls. The travails of the

provided the front that emerges has a common minimum programme. This happened even earlier but the ambition of the then Congress president, Sitaram Kesri, got the better of the understanding which the Congress had given. He wanted to be the Prime Minister himself, unlike Sonia Gandhi who has successfully pushed the issue into the background.

However, the scenario this time has changed. Very few parties or, for that matter, individuals have any commitment to principles or values,

a RSS sanchalak, has made confusion more confounded by publicly seeking voters' support for Vajpayee.

In any case, combinations without ideology are opportunistic in content and temporary in nature. India has gone through a similar phase when the coalitions, cobbled together through the lure of office, have broken on the "division of spoils." The two general elections in the 1990s, within a span of 18 months, showed how true it was. If power is going to provide glue to

faith in parliament is lessening day by day.

Yet this does not answer the question which a Pakistan TV network asked me the other day: Why do people vote in such large numbers? The 55 to 60 per cent, out of an electorate of 650 million casting their votes is, indeed, mind-boggling. In the first phase held on April 20, as many as 100 million people, equal to the voters in America, exercised their franchise. In the second phase held on April 26, the average again was between

do feel that their alienation is making the rulers to sit up and think of some steps to retrieve the people's faith. The confidence to change the rulers is getting converted into a desire to elect such a government which can give the people employment, water, electricity and roads.

It is true that the voters relate all elections to the living conditions and larger issues attract hardly any attention, as seen in the current Lok Sabha polls. But the governments also, increasingly, realise that they cannot last if they do not perform. This is what has come to be called the anti-incumbency factor which is dreaded by governments in power. Chief Minister SM Kirshna in Karnataka and his counterpart Chandrababu Naidu in Andhra Pradesh have done a commendable job. Their contribution to information technology which has made even America envious is substantial. But this has not got translated into benefits for the common man.

True, caste and communal considerations have come to affect the pattern of voting and the fortunes of political parties. Some have gained. For example, the BJP has progressed through communalism and the BSP through caste. Yet, they have not been able to divert people's attention from bread, their primary need. India has proved over and over again that a political party, however parochial and tendentious, has to spell out how it will improve the lot of the people. The voters have begun to see through the dust the parties raise. This is a plus point.

Kuldip Nayyar is an eminent Indian columnist.

## BETWEEN THE LINES

To say that the voters in India love democracy is too simplistic an answer. Indeed, they do. They proved it in 1977 when they voted out the mighty Indira Gandhi... What makes the voters queue up before the polling booths is their belief that they can change their plight through by changing their rulers, Over the years they have been trying this exercise. Not that they have succeeded but they do feel that their alienation is making the rulers to sit up and think of some steps to retrieve the people's faith.

Congress combination will not be less even if it reaches the figure of 160, as is the estimate. The communists who may be 50-strong have announced their support to any anti-BJP front but have also said that their backing would be issue based. They have predicted that the country is heading for the 1996-like situation when the opposition parties, including the Congress, evolved an alternative, a third front of secular parties.

My information is that some parties have already talked among themselves about such a front. Congress president Sonia Gandhi, who has been sounded on the proposal, is not opposed to the idea

Secularism and communalism have come to be mere slogans. People having a record of long-standing association with the BJP have crossed over to the Congress. This applies to the Congressmen also. They too have bolted the party for the sake of ticket. And how does one describe the Congress decision to field candidates like Sajjan Kumar, who had been denied the Congress ticket since 1984 because of his linkage with the killing of the Sikhs during the riots that followed Indira Gandhi's assassination. The Congress has also included Himachal's Sukh Ram whom it had ousted at one time on charges of corruption. The Haryana governor,

coalitions, the governments are bound to be unstable.

Stretched beyond a point, they can end up in a mid-term poll. The country should seriously consider whether it should have a law to guarantee the Lok Sabha tenure for full five years. Such legislation is in operation in Germany. So far the system in India has shown enough resilience and overcome the deficiencies it has faced from time to time.

Parliament, by and large, has stood the test. But all this cannot continue indefinitely. There will have to be a consensus on certain basics in the country. It is all the more necessary because the people's

55 and 60 per cent.

To say that the voters in India love democracy is too simplistic an answer. Indeed, they do. They proved it in 1977 when they voted out the mighty Indira Gandhi who had imposed the emergency and switched off the lights of democracy. What makes the voters queue up before the polling booths is their belief that they can change their plight through by changing their rulers, whether they are at the level of village or city (panchayat and municipality) or that of state (assembly) and at the centre (parliament). Over the years they have been trying this exercise. Not that they have succeeded but they

## OPINION

# The govt must change its attitude

AH DEWAN

I am closely following the opinions being expressed in the letter columns of the DS where some regular contributors have played Awami League for its movement to unseat the Coalition government headed by BNP. Any right thinking man would not like an elected government to go before its legitimate tenure. But when that government fails miserably to deliver good governance and when it assumes the facade of no better than a dictator ("When an elected govt. behaves like a dictator" -- commentary by the DS Editor referred) what alternative is there but to want change of the men at the helm of state affairs through a mid-term election? To give leverage to BNP it is often brought home that AL did not do better, and some also say it is just the other side of the same coin. But would you countenance the 'wrongs of BNP pointing fingers to the follies of AL? People taught AL a good lesson for its failure to live upto our expectations and voted BNP and its alliances into office. But BNP-headed Coalition government has simply shattered our expectations to the hilt.

A government's first and foremost duty should be the concern for the welfare of all citizens of the country. But has it neared to that end? It had made pledges to give us moon, and in two and a half years of its governance we got thousands of

our fellow men snuffed out, and never before had the country witnessed so great a number lost their lives at the hands of terrorists. Abduction of businessmen in particular for ransom is almost a regular occurrence. Latest gruesome murder of a father and his son in the old part of the city speaks of terrorists acting on their free will. Immediately after the Coalition's take-over there were 'narrowing tales of depravity', that the members of minority Hindu community were subjected to and supporters of AL also met the scourge. That dented our image abroad, and international human rights organisation had to intervene. Professor Muhuri of Chittagong fell a broad day light victim to terrorists' bullets, and thereafter fell a hermit in Chittagong and leaders of AL in Khulna, Rajshahi and Natore and elsewhere. By this time we have many stories of torture and rape like the one carried on Mahima by young party goons. We had to see primitive bestiality of burning a whole Hindu family but one member to death in Chittagong. More than thirty houses were burnt and looted and inmates evicted in Natore following the death of the nephew of a Deputy Minister at the hand of the members of an outlawed party.

But the perpetrators, the arsonists allegedly remain at large under the party blessing. Rule of law? It is warped at will with the police used only to serve the interest of the party

in power. The claim of the party 'the nation's interest is above that of the party's is in limbo now or has gone with the wind.

The extortion or toll collection is more virulently practised than before, and many lost their lives when they declined to pay. The picture of a father and a son of Mirpur falling prey to extortionists' bullets is still vivid in our memory. A travel agency businessman at Nazrul Islam Avenue met the same fate. Only the other day a worker at a sweetmeat shop in Mirpur was gunned down. A promising cricketer's life was cut short by a hijacker's bullets. These all are happening in the capital where all branches of police with lately commissioned RAT/RAB are in place with ostentation of paraphernalia. Then what of other district towns? The drive and display of arms recovery come to be a futile exercise as it is aimed at with political motive. Trading guns between rivals of the same party cadres or between JCD and Shibir are reported but the police play the role of spectators. At the outset of the BNP-Led Coalition government the JCD cadres ransacked the cadres ransacked the Plassey market of computer services for toll collection and the police did not dare to bust them.

Now the businessmen of the whole country appear to be hostages. How come that the extortionists are taking lives one after another and government's machin-

ery cannot nab them? If the government reportedly could release about seventy thousand offenders only on the merit of their being the party adherents and brag for that, and if it could induct a lawmaker accused of holding unlicensed weapon into the party, and if it could nominate an alleged criminal to be a lawmaker, you cannot expect the government but to drag its feet than to take action. So is the rot in law and order in profusion. The Time magazine of late dubbed us 'A State of Disgrace' on myriad counts, and what more is left for our image to be badly tarnished?

The price spiral which badly affected the general mass, especially those of the bracket income, seems to be no concern for the government. Why shall we have to pay 20 to 30 per cent more for the food stuff, especially for the pulse, edible oil, flour and tinned powder milk, the every day essentials, with the changes of the government which talks big, when there is not the least increase in our purchasing capacity? The price of milk/baby food has gone beyond the reach of middle/lower middle class family and their children will grow malnourished for want of milk. The change of man of the Ministry will sway little if the syndicate that controls the import and marketing from behind is not dealt with iron hand.

When law and order has stopped all time low the corruption has reached all time high. Bangladesh

under this government also has been ranked twice in a row as number one corrupt country by TI. Ministers were alleged to be involved, one in works under Danish grant, and the other in wheat scam, but no remorse or reproach. Even the member of judiciary faces bribery charge, let alone the police whose filthy practice is legendary. It is beyond anybody's imagination to get govt. employment without barter of bucks. It is possible only in Bangladesh for petty workers in Titas Gas, PDB, Customs to become a millionaire. When obtaining a party ticket for nomination depends on who could pay more to the party fund is an abiding practice, corruption gets its moorings there like the charity begins at home. And understandably the payer must reimburse the money back in many folds by any means, like, as they allege, a police officer makes it a point to recover what he has paid for getting the job or suitable posting.

Democracy entails other's right to freedom of speech, freedom to disagree, freedom to protest against the wrongs of the party in position by way of meeting, demonstration or procession. But this govt. would tolerate no criticism or dissent. On the other hand, journalists were put to death by 'unknown' assailants (Manik Saha the latest victim) some beaten mercilessly and some carry the threats of dire consequences, for unearthing the misdeeds of certain quarters. Coalition partner JI

lawmaker Moulana Sayedi demands in the House for arrest of Professor Humayun Azad and banning of his book, and it takes no time to launch a fatal attack on his life. To foil the meeting and peaceful gathering of the opposite camp it unleashes police and its cadres. It all started with beating the female students of Shamsunahar Hall, shamefully under the cover of night, where also police were aided by JCD cadres.

We saw former president B. Chowdhury's meeting attacked rowdily and the arches erected and the stages made for tour in South Bengal of the Opposition Leader Sheikh Hasina ravaged by the government party cadres and activists. Earlier AL leaders and women party workers were brutally bludgeoned during their every hartal day processions in Dhaka. How outrageous it was that AL President and the ex-PM Sheikh Hasina was denied her privilege and democratic rights to enter the CMH and see wounded Prof. Humayun Azad! Even the farmer of our constitution Dr. Kamal Hossain who has since been outspoken about the sad state of affairs was assailed by the BNP cadres at CHT.

The PM is full-throated about unprecedented development her govt has brought forth. Yes, you can find development on the Dhaka streets, which are being narrowed by dismantling the existing dividers and rebuilding the same covering

more space which are often creating deadly impediments and are sheer wastage of huge public funds allegedly being rolled into the hands of the party men in the garb of contractors. The nation that cannot afford necessary drugs for its Health Complexes to treat poor patients or enough blackboard and benches in the primary schools cannot allow in such extravagant outlay. That money could make another fly-over to help ease the city's traffic jam. The countryside is also witnessing massive road works, but you will find none other than the party workers in charge of the works, and so quality of works remains a delusion (AL also did the same, but following that bad example is simply worse).

Load-shedding is getting more erratic and easy availability of fertiliser still remains a far cry. Development signifies growth of industrial infrastructure and creation of opportunity for employment. No such pragmatic policy has been evolved, nor foreign investment could be lured. Rather many mills like Adamjee Jute Mills and others have been shut down or sent to lay off making hundreds of workers jobless. There has been no upward change in per capita income to justify the claims of 'unprecedented development'. In the face of such successful stories of unsuccessful all the opposition parties including the leftists are on the streets to demand for a change.

In democracy the opposition is

reckoned to play the part of a 'shadow government' and the party in power takes the opposition into its confidence, but in Bangladesh they are inimical to each other. The incumbent government is more conspicuous in its hostile attitude to the opposition. With brute majority in the parliament and with assistance of branded anti-liberation forces it made no secret of its intention to wipe out AL; it purged all departments of officers having leaning towards AL, it harassed many leaders and workers under trumped up charges, it vilifies AL as enemy to the country media and machinery to discredit AL. The police are more after the Awami Leaguers than they are for the criminals. Look at the biggest ever arms haul in Chittagong. Like the last one in Bogra when the government promptly blamed AL, this time too the Home Minister did not take time to say that they did not rule out. AL's involvement here. The blame game is on.

If the government makes even pretension to democratic polity it must pave the way for other parties to have their say either in parliament or on the streets. So is the need for radical change in its attitude.