

14th Amendment

Still time to rethink

THE 14th Constitution Amendment Bill is going to be placed before parliament today. We are making a last ditch attempt to persuade the government to rethink the points at issue arising out of the amendment move.

First, the number of women's seats in parliament is going to be raised. However, the mere raising of the number of such seats was never considered as important as having the women candidates elected directly. It needs hardly any elaboration that directly elected women members will not only feel empowered but also be truly representative of their constituencies. To be frank, this was an election pledge of the ruling party included in its manifesto and oft-repeated since then. The other major party, the Awami League, is committed to the same plank of direct election for women. So the two major parties have had a consensus on the issue.

Since the opposition will be attending Sunday's parliament session and direct election of women is an outstanding pledge of both the parties, it is a grand opportunity for the government to initiate a dialogue with the opposition on the question. This will help effect a breakthrough in this area by acting upon the consensus that already exists. By one stroke, they will have served democracy and the cause of women's empowerment and brought the opposition into a collaborative exercise on a vital issue. All these are ample reason for the government to take a fresh approach to the matter.

As for the use of portraits of prime minister and president in government offices, we believe this should not be part of any constitutional provision. The matter should be kept above all controversy and treated as more of a custom than a constitutional obligation.

On the question of raising the retirement age of Supreme Court judges, a segment of public opinion could be discerning a political agenda behind it. In principle, we are not opposed to a higher age-limit for the Judges' retirement. But given the time and the environment of political suspicion, the exalted image of the highest judiciary should be protected even from any suggestion of controversy. As such, this should also be rethought.

In fact, the entire gamut of the amendment proposal needs recasting in order to receive a broad-based endorsement.

Ahmadiyya persecution picks up speed

Official inaction contributes to insecurity

LAST month, anti-Ahmadiyya zealots, with the police virtually cooperating, took it upon themselves to storm the Ahmadiyya mosque in Nakhla para to remove any books that they deemed unlawful under the government's January order banning all Ahmadiyya publications. This month it has been the ransacking and looting of Ahmadiyya homes in four villages in Rangpur. In addition to the attacks on their homes, the Ahmadiyya communities have been isolated and ostracised in their villages. Ahmadiyya children cannot attend school and the adults cannot go to the market for fear of reprisal.

The most disturbing aspect of this renewed violence against the Ahmadiyya community has been the indifference of the local authorities to their plight. Not only did the local police take no steps to stop the ransacking of their homes, and have done nothing to reinstate Ahmadiyyas as full members of the community in the affected villages, the local police claim to know nothing of the attacks. Ahmadiyya community leaders contend that the police refused to record any case when the complaint was taken to them.

When the authorities, whose duty it is to protect every person within their jurisdiction, are unwilling to take steps to safeguard a threatened community, then they must be considered just as culpable as those who actually commit the violence. The disgraceful dereliction of their duty to protect the minority community renders the local Rangpur police complicit in the atrocities.

It is bad enough that the government caved in to its extremist allies and banned Ahmadiyya publications, thereby emboldening the anti-Ahmadiyya zealots and further marginalising the community. We reiterate our call for the unconstitutional ban to be lifted. But, at the very least, and without delay, the government must commit to ensuring the safety of the Ahmadiyya community from any kind of attacks that it is suffering in Rangpur.

What happened in India

A POLITICAL ANALYST

THE historic upset victory by the Congress alliance over the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance has left the ruling coalition shell-shocked. Rarely in the past were the opinion and exit polls proved so wrong. BJP President Venkiah Naidu and General Secretary Promod Mahajan publicly expressed their shock and surprise over the election results. Congress alliance with 219 seats and Left Front parties with 64 seats backing the Congress left NDA with only 188 seats and no other option but to announce their decision to sit in the opposition.

Though CPI(M) General Secretary Harikishen Singh Surjeet thought that Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajbadi Party (SP) would join the government, some leaders of both the Congress and SP who are rivals in Uttar Pradesh are not convinced of long term gains if the two parties were to join hands at the centre. Besides Rahul Gandhi's recent accusation that SP was secretly helping BJP was not well received by Mulayam Singh. But Bahujan Samaj Party chief Mayawati's unilateral support extended to Sonia Gandhi could prevent Mulayam Singh from driving a hard bargain with the Congress in his negotiations for inclusion of his party in the union cabinet. SP, however, has said publicly that, as of now, the party has not been asked by the Congress to join the cabinet as the Congress does not need SP's support given her own and alliance's strength coupled with the 64 members of the Left Front which more than makes up the simple majority required for forming a cabinet.

Former prime minister VP Singh would like parties like SP, BSP and all others to support a Congress-led government because he sees the elections as a fight between communal and secular forces in which the latter

has won, and the victory was essential for the preservation of the secular character of the Indian Constitution and the unity of the country. The Left Front has not as yet decided upon the form of their support to a Congress-led government which would be decided by the CPI and CPI(M) parties' central committee and the politburo. One should not,

ered "untouchable" a decade ago, nor the Congress, which in its heyday would never have imagined contesting just four seats in Bihar because Laloo Prasad Yadav would not allow more, can call the shots easily now. The rout of Chandrababu in Andhra Pradesh and Jayalalita in Tamil Nadu (she drew blank in the Lok Sabha elections) consid-

leaders are already on record having said that Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin is not an issue, and Jyoti Basu has taken to a rather legal interpretation by saying that since she is an Indian national there should not be any bar to her becoming prime minister. After all, India does not have the American law that the president has to be native born. Nor is

now in the hands of his erstwhile heroine Jayalalita, while NTR was elected chief minister of Andhra Pradesh. The point made here is that the known faces from the entertainment world appear to have some appeal to the voters. How else would one explain Govinda's victory over Ram Nayek, a veteran politician and a minister in Vajpayee cabinet?

and stable. Besides, Indian stock market like bourses in emerging economies behave more in tune with global trend than local political conditions. On foreign affairs, Congress-led government is unlikely to make any sharp changes. On Indo-Pak relations, Sonia Gandhi has already announced that Congress-led government will stay the course. One hopes that the next government will continue India's friendly relations with her neighbours and not be influenced by Promethean actions now habitually being carried out by the lone superpower in the world.

In the whole drama, the sad but inevitable part is the exit of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, a school master's son from Gwalior who rose to be one of the finest prime ministers of India. Though he will remain the leader of the opposition, it is doubtful (as voiced by Promod Mahajan) that Vajpayee will agree to remain as opposition leader for five years after having served India three times as prime minister. In an eulogy to Vajpayee, Vir Sangvi wrote in the Hindustan Times, "He is the first non-Congress prime minister whose government did not fall before the end of his term. He is the man who made BJP electable. And he is the first prime minister who showed that coalition politics could not only work in India, but were probably the only means of ensuring stability." Vajpayee's tenure also saw India becoming a software superpower. Besides, he always kept a distance from the Sangh Parivar. Perhaps the greatest blemish of the Vajpayee legacy will remain the Gujarat riot when Narendra Modi was allowed passage to fascism through Vajpayee's reluctance to punish the guilty. One hopes with the ideological change in the governance in India that the wronged will finally get their day in court.

If ultimately Sonia Gandhi becomes prime minister, in order to avoid the fate of six United Front prime ministers in five years, she will have to tailor her reform programmes to meet the demands of her coalition partners, particularly from the Left Front. Dr. Manmohan Singh, should he become Finance Minister, may have to abandon or amend Arun Shourie's disinvestment policy.

however, gloss over the contradictions between the Congress and CPI(M) in West Bengal, Tripura and Kerala. Besides, the left parties given their best performance ever in a national election, is likely to insist on a pro-poor economic agenda and the dissolution of Arun Shourie's policy of disinvestment.

The decimation of Chandrababu Naidu in Andhra Pradesh and SM Krishna in Karnataka has proved that though they could put Bangalore and Hyderabad on the world map for their IT excellence, the neglect felt by the rural voters was ultimately paid back in their dismissal from governance. Though Congress may regain governance in Karnataka due to support by former prime minister Devi Gouda's party, the lesson to be learnt is that India's majority of the electorate still live in villages, and can be ignored only at the peril of the rulers.

The Hindustan Times in a pre-election overview pointed out a very important factor that has emerged in the recent Indian politics. The paper wrote that alliances at the national level have brought India to a generation of politics where the regional players are now firmly in the saddle. Neither the BJP, consid-

erably affected BJP's fortune. Akali Dal in Punjab (perhaps due to anti-incumbency factor) and Navin Patnaik in Orissa could deliver goods to the BJP. The party, however, retained its hold in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chattisgarh (where BJP swept the polls in the state elections in December prompting the party to call for early elections) and won more than half of the Lok Sabha seats in Maharashtra. But contrary to the claims of Narendra Modi, a true representative of the reactionary Sangh Parivar, Gujarat was not delivered to BJP. In Delhi, Sheila Dixit once again proved her mettle by delivering six (one for her son) of the seven Lok Sabha seats to the Congress. The Congress alliance also did well in Haryana, Assam, Bihar, and Jharkhand. In embattled Jammu and Kashmir, Congress won four seats.

Sonia Gandhi campaigned with dignity though her foreign origin issue was repeatedly raised by BJP throughout the election campaign, sometimes in rather inelegant terms. But the very fact that despite BJP's warning that a foreigner should not be allowed to become prime minister of India the voters' choice of Congress has given her electoral legitimacy. The left

it an issue with DMK's Karunanidhi. NCP's Sharad Pawar, who left Congress on this issue several years back, has skirted a direct response on the foreign origin issue saying that he has to consult his party's other leaders before making a decision. But then NCP will only nine MPs and Pawar will need Congress in the coming state elections in Maharashtra. In a different context, Sharad Pawar would have made an excellent candidate for the premiership with much greater acceptability than Dr. Manmohan Singh (a Sikh) or Pranab Mukherjee who has a weak political base in West Bengal.

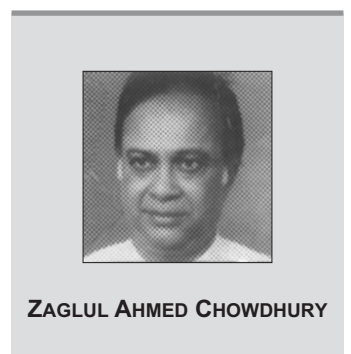
The Congress party is solidly behind Sonia Gandhi and would like her to be the next prime minister. It is difficult to say how much the Nehru/Gandhi charisma shaped the overall electoral verdict. Indian politics is caste-ridden where the caste of the candidate plays a great role in his/her election.

Bollywood attraction is another factor. Actors Sunil Dutt (Congress), Raj Babbar (SP), Dharmendra (BJP), Vinod Khanna (BJP), Govinda (Congress), and Jaya Pradha (SP) will adorn the next Lok Sabha. In the past, MGR ruled Tamil Nadu,

No single factor can explain the defeat of the BJP which obviously had overestimated the "feel good" factor and sweeping wins in the state elections in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh. If Naidu lost in Andhra Pradesh because of his alleged neglect of the poor, Navin Patnaik (son of Biju Patnaik) won in Orissa because of reported good governance. And Laloo Prasad Yadav continues to win in Bihar (where wife Ravri Devi is chief minister) despite reported bad governance and Bihar's reputation as one of the most lawless states in India.

If ultimately Sonia Gandhi becomes prime minister, in order to avoid the fate of six United Front prime ministers in five years, she will have to tailor her reform programmes to meet the demands of her coalition partners, particularly from the Left Front. Dr. Manmohan Singh, should he become Finance Minister, may have to abandon or amend Arun Shourie's disinvestment policy. Already Bombay stock market is jittery due to current political uncertainty and lot of ONGC's shares have been offloaded. But situation is expected to calm down once the political scene becomes clearer

Complacency and a risky gamble sinks NDA



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

WHEN the 22-party rainbow coalition of national democratic alliance (NDA) government led by prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee called early national elections in India six months ahead of the scheduled time, most people saw the decision as a great measure of confidence on part of the ruling alliance. The NDA was then basking in the glory of unexpected big success in the assembly elections in which it toppled the Congress from power from two important states -- Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan -- where the BJP, main constituent of the NDA, scored handsomely and the party wanted to cash in on the mood and support reflected in the voting. Many thought that the decision for advanced polls was timely and the NDA may end up with around or more than 300 seats in the 545-member Lok Sabha, much more than required to form a government.

However, some analysts, though scant in number, described the decision as a risky gamble which was likely to pay off but could also boomeranged on the ruling coalition since Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan should not

necessarily be taken as the barometer of national sentiments. This apprehension, sadly for the NDA, came true. The alliance performed very well also in the national elections in these two states where the Congress and its allies cut a sorry figure.

But the scenario in elsewhere in India is dismal for the NDA and it is so much so in some states like the Tamil Nadu and West Bengal that it drew a total blank. In Tamil Nadu, BJP and its allies failed to

situation for its return to power after eight years. That too has come under the leadership of a lady who has always been ruthlessly described by the critics as a "foreigner" because she was born in Italy and by dealing a crushing blow to a charismatic and long experienced leader like Vajpayee.

It is a fast developing situation particularly as regards when the government will be formed and who would become the prime minister. In the past, situation

party and obviously it will have the first chance to form the government.

With its allies like the Rastriya Janata Dal from Bihar, DMK from Tamil Nadu, and Nationalist Congress in Maharashtra, and parties willing to extend support like the Left Front in West Bengal, the Congress is well poised to have the required majority for a new government in India. When this piece is published, it is possible that sufficient progress has been

was counting on "shining India" but the crude reality is that this "shine" touched some urban areas but not the overwhelmingly rural areas.

This slogan itself was counter-productive as many poor took it as ridiculous in their plight. A good harvest claimed by the NDA had nothing to do with the government's performance but a favourable weather. Efforts for good ties with arch rival Pakistan had the approval of major political parties

before. On the contrary, the Congress made serious strides to win back power and Sonia visited far flung areas with the call for a change that appealed to many voters. She herself spared to efforts to adjust with Indian language and culture and drafting Priyanka and Rahul into active politics helped ease off the campaign on "foreigners" issue and paid dividends. It also forged better electoral alliance this time compared to the NDA and covered more areas in the vast country in terms of meaningfully reaching out to the electorate.

The Congress also succeeded in convincing most minorities that the BJP is trying to appease them as an electoral strategy but they may experience Gujarat type conditions if the NDA is again voted to power. There are other issues as well which favoured the Congress. However, the verdict is fractured and not an absolute one. But the very fact that it is the Congress and not the BJP which got maximum seats is a splendid victory by the non-NDA secular forces in the existing circumstances.

Whatever be the scenario as far as the governance is concerned in the future, as far as the outcome of the elections is concerned, it is a spectacular performance for the Congress and its leader Sonia while a disaster for the BJP which may find it extremely difficult to recover the lost ground.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is Senior Special Correspondent of BSS.

MATTERS AROUND US

Several factors can be attributed to the unexpected shocking defeat for the NDA and a remarkable victory for the Congress and its allies. First, NDA's confidence for a comfortable win in the polls was misplaced as it judged the mood only on the basis of the outcome of the two states where the Congress was in power and was suffering from anti-incumbency crisis. It did not bother much to calculate the situation elsewhere like the vast Uttar Pradesh and the south where it performed very badly.

secure any of the 39 seats while BJP has been totally eliminated from leftist-ruled West Bengal where its ally Trinamul Congress just saved its face by winning a single seat by its chief Mamata Banerjee.

In many other places like Delhi, the NDA somehow maintained its presence as it won only one of the seven seats in the Indian capital.

The whole result was a kind of anti-climax not only for the NDA but also many independent observers and exit polls. It has been a shocking defeat for the NDA and more so more its main partner BJP and its two top leaders Vajpayee and Advani. By stark contrast, the outcome of the polls is something like a dream coming true for the Congress -- creating a

existed in India in the post-election scenario, when confusion existed about the formation of the new government as well as about the leader. But this time there is hardly any doubt that it is the Congress which is going to form the government with its allies and like minded parties and its leader Sonia Gandhi is set to become the prime minister.

True, none of the parties or the alliance has secured an outright victory to easily enable the formation of the new government but the NDA has conceded defeat in a gracious demonstration of adherence of the democratic values even when the trend was clear that it was going to lose the peoples mandate. The Congress has emerged as the single majority

made towards forming a new government and a new prime minister, which in all probability is a Congress-led ministry with Sonia Gandhi at the helm.

Several factors can be attributed to the unexpected shocking defeat for the NDA and a remarkable victory for the Congress and its allies. First, NDA's confidence for a comfortable win in the polls was misplaced as it judged the mood only on the basis of the outcome of the two states where the Congress was in power and was suffering from anti-incumbency crisis. It did not bother much to calculate the situation elsewhere like the vast Uttar Pradesh and the south where it performed very badly. It spoke of a good economy and

even though the NDA sought to project this as its contribution. The cricket series with Pakistan, the NDA felt, boosted its popularity among the electorate, but the Congress sent Sonia's daughter Priyanka and Rahul to Karachi to watch the match and support the event.

Here, the NDA did not get the benefit of Indian win in Pakistan. Too much of attack on Sonia Gandhi on the "foreigners" issue and designs to even colour her children as "half-foreigner" drew support and sympathy for Congress whose top leaders mostly belonged to the famous Nehru-Gandhi family. Finally, the NDA was too complacent and relied very much on Vajpayee's image, which is certainly not as strong as

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.

AL's late April fool

The editor gave us a felicitous commentary on the AL's hoax in the name of toppling the elected government by April 30, and it would be worthwhile for the AL leadership to seriously take note of the bankruptcy it has shown and the suggestions put forth by the editor. The whole nation was on tenterhooks that a sort of upheaval was round the corner, though to every politically conscious man, it was merely a demand only to end in smoke. And I am sure majority of the AL supporters, too, were not beyond that comprehension. Maybe, the party stuck to its guns to keep the morale of its supporters high and the government on its toes. The government armed with a string of intelligence agencies

should have a surfeit of information on what was the possibility for the AL to be able to oust it. And it had that information that people, though disgruntled at its omissions and commissions, were not ready to rally behind the AL for an upsurge, as the latter is still under persistent flak for what it did during its reign. Moreover, the party that is not even allowed to gather before its central office, how could it put up a mass showdown? Then how come the government could unleash the law enforcers for mass harassment of unimaginable proportions? To send shock wave? Tahseen Alam Chowdhury's 'Snake snaps in fear' was a nice, piercing piece on this aspect (DS April 27). The exercise must have had a telling effect to sap people's confidence in the BNP.

On the other hand, the AL would not be spared from being suitably slated for the chilling treatment meted out to hundreds of people as a result of its much trumpeted unsavory demand. Many looked at it as a preposterous or unscrupulous shot. Did it reap any benefit from the two days' shut-down except colossal loss to the country's economy?

Time is ripe enough for the AL leadership to search its conscience and work out what interest of the masses it could so far serve by its variety of street programmes. People strongly feel that the AL is now on the slippery slope and hence there is no alternative but to send its lawmakers to parliament to show their mettle there, not in the streets. **Ahmed Niaz**

Dhaka

The government is there...

The government still remains in power even after the expiry of 30th April 2004 deadline. April 30 is a day of significance and will be remembered for three reasons. The Awami League (AL) not only fooled the BNP-led four party alliance government but also the entire nation by continuously saying that the government would be forced to resign or be toppled on that particular date. AL general secretary Abdul Jalil has failed to earn the status of an astrologer. His dream has been shattered; rather it was a nightmare for him. So all the astrologers of the country are happy because no harm has

been done to their profession. The long awaited and much publicized drama, '30 April' produced by the Awami League, directed by Abdul Jalil and instructed by Sheikh Hasina failed to attract the spectators. Instead of becoming a box-office hit, it was a super flop. **Iqbal Ahmed Dhaka**

Political cunning

I cannot but negatively admire the cunning of the main opposition party, for displaying, in a superlative way, a high level of mastery inactivity! Now its MPs would go to parliament, for extension of their perks, for non-activity inside the JS! This leakage of tax money cannot be plugged.

In our fast changing society, some are floating on wealth, some riding on waves, some are firmly anchored (guess how), while some others are enjoying the shuttle service. Omissions and commissions are big business, under the burqa (veil). Note: Males also use invisible burqa! Hide your supposed sins and acts of indiscretion, to be politically discreet. Caution: ride on a halal CNG vehicle.

The hidden guess is how BB would have reacted to this style of running a party. Turn the spotlight on the opponents, and take a siesta in the twilight--there is enough allowance left for rest and recreation! We have no officially recognised national dress code; so leisure-hour garments are quite popular during official presence. Watch that the long sleeves of the kurta cover the fingers of

the leaders--white or blue-collar, or the zamindari hang-over? of course, a person is judged by his dress, even if politics were naked and unashamed. When our political Jatra parties would wind up? All the world is a stage, and the politicians have to act not in reality. When do they work? How to differentiate between the two? Pause. **AZ Dhaka**

Politicians

If I wreck my brain, I can easily recall those days when a politician was a dedicated person, who, by his wisdom, consistency, winsome character, probity and with exemplary track record of social works, could command the respect of common people. The politicians never got the blind support of their enchanted supporters, unless they were transparent in their

programmes. It was a dangerous profession in the British and Pakistan period, because a slight deviation from their Orbit could bring opprobrium, and some times bitter government reprimand.

A politician could be easily incarcerated or sent to exile for the antagonism or recalcitrance to an obstinate government policy. I would like to mention the names of Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Haq, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Hussain Shahed Suhrawardy, Moulana Bhashani and many more who made their mark as politicians of wisdom, integrity and courage. **Mridha Abdul Bari, On mail**