

Manmohan in saddle

His statements encouraging

DR. Manmohan Singh was sworn in as India's 14th prime minister on Saturday, bringing to a close an unsettled week in Indian politics following the Congress party's upset victory in the recently-concluded general election. Dr. Singh's taking the oath of office finally closes the door on speculation that Sonia Gandhi might be persuaded to reconsider her decision to step aside from the top spot. A 68-member coalition led by Dr. Singh takes up the reins of government.

The incumbent premier, who has had a long and distinguished career as an economist and banker and bureaucrat to his credit, as well as a highly regarded term as Finance Minister from 1991 to 1996 in the government of Narasimha Rao, is an unimpeachable choice for the prime ministership. And, this has been well-received within India as well as outside India.

As the architect of the pro-market reforms adopted by the Narasimha Rao government and continued by the BJP-led NDA since 1996, Dr. Singh has the stature and credibility to reassure both Indians and nervous foreign investors that he will ably manage the economic reforms that are necessary for India's continued development.

However, Dr. Singh has made it clear that while he remains committed to much-needed economic reform, he will preside over a regimen of "economic reforms with a human face." He has promised the rural poor "a responsible macro-economic policy that focuses on agriculture and employment."

Dr. Singh, who is India's first PM from the minority Sikh community has also pledged to make "unity and communal harmony a priority" for his government. In all other spheres, by building on the advances of the NDA years while reigning in or reversing the worst of the NDA's excesses, Dr. Singh's administration promises to be a bright one that "gives the world and the Indian people a model for reform."

His desire to work for good neighbourly relations in South Asia with a focus on rapprochement with Pakistan augurs well for peace and prosperity in South Asia.

The Bangladeshi PM and leader of the opposition have extended handsome sentiments of congratulation to the new PM and there is good cause for hope that Dr. Singh's premiership will usher in an era of renewed co-operation between our nation and India. On matters of bilateral concern, such as India's notorious river linking project, Dhaka can expect a friendly ear in Dr. Manmohan Singh. Indeed, on all bilateral matters, such as the trade imbalance, push-back at the border, delimitation of land and maritime boundaries, we look forward to a cooperative approach from the new Indian government.

Commonwealth ban on Pakistan lifted

Ball now in Musharraf's court

PAKISTAN is celebrating its re-admission to Commonwealth after its membership had been put under suspension for five long years. Though the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group praised the country's progress towards democracy, it stated in the same breath that President Pervez Musharraf was expected to fulfill his pledge to stand down as chief of army by the end of this year. The Commonwealth makes it clear too that it intends to keep track and monitor progress on 'strengthening the democratic process'. There are others who believe that President Musharraf has been rewarded for helping to fight al-Qaeda as a key ally in the US-British war against terror.

Whatever it is, Pakistan cannot afford to ruin this opportunity of being taken fully onboard by the 53-nation Commonwealth which had suspended the country's membership following Musharraf's seizure of power from elected prime minister Nawaz Sharif in 1999.

The Commonwealth's lifting of the ban has gone down as a 'moral win' for President Musharraf. But has it in the eye of Pakistanis? Musharraf's democratic reforms still leave a lot to be desired and he owes it to the people to restore full democracy in Pakistan.

India's new government was quick to endorse Pakistan's reentry to Commonwealth. In a way, this gives a positive vibe for improving ties between New Delhi and Islamabad.

Let's hope that President Musharraf will relinquish his role as head of the army. That would be deemed to be a step towards democratising the Pakistan polity. One has to wait and see on that. But, admittedly, Pakistan's reentry to the Commonwealth has helped her regain her footing with the important bloc of nations much as it would bring economic benefits to her people.

The end of an aberration



M ABDUL HAFIZ

AT independence India's founding fathers had been particularly circumspect about the unity of their vast diverse country wherein lay its success and security. Therefore, it was hardly a matter of choice when they devised pluralistic democracy, secularism and a composite culture as binding glue to hold together a multi-racial, multi-linguistic and multi-religious India. This might not have been an unqualified success because the Congress which ruled India for first forty years was, after all, a grand coalition according to Rajni Kothari, the political scientist -- ironically subsuming in it widely diverse groups of people and opinions. Consequently there could have been inadvertent slips in India's secular experimentation. But India officially pursued it with

vigour and earnestness till about 1989 when for the first time the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) an ultra-right Hindu nationalist outfit made its appearance palpable in Indian politics. An off-shoot of Desai's Janata Dal the party came a cropper in 1984 election bagging just two seats. By adopting the stance of Ram Temple movement of VHP LK Advani put the party on the first track of Indian politics.

calling the shots. Obviously an India of Mahatma Gandhi or Jawaharlal Nehru could not be quite comfortable with the new breed of rulers who conjured up the image of brutes vicariously guilty of Mahatma's assassination or a bunch of fanatics demolishing Babri mosque and torching churches out of sheer intolerance. BJP's fascist character called for undoing everything India built up to

BJP succeeded in pulling down the edifice of the country's multicultural heritage the majority of Indians feeling shorn of their anchor, were left with little to savour and stillness to pride on. The Indian polity lost the course charted by its visionary leaders portending a period of aberration in national politics. At the peak of this aberration came the malignant brand of Hidutva which ominously

There are constitutional imperatives for a pluralistic democracy like India where there cannot be denial of justice, no second class citizen or minorities. The ultra-right BJP's outlook and policies were viciously sectarian. If implemented as it was trying to do so graphically, it was feared, it could destroy India! Thanks to the articulated protests of India's highly conscientious civil society

containing the insanity. In last election it was specifically the turn of India's common people whose hard issues and problems were seldom addressed amidst communal frenzy deliberately kept alive by Hindutva zealots. It was the turn to give their verdict to put India back on the road to the goals envisioned by the nation's architects. The enlightened electorate of India immersed in the tradition of democracy and pluralism made no mistake and put an end to a dark chapter of aberration that crept into their national life. The 14th Lokshava election resulted neither in the victory of Congress or Sonia Gandhi. It was the triumph of India as envisioned by Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Nehru and Moulana Azad.

It is a great moment for India when someone from the minority Sikh community becomes the country's prime minister. The tradition thus set benefits only a great nation like India. All the BJP did or could do later was to trivialise that greatness. Only if India's composite culture and democratic pluralism can be guarded zealously the BJP will not dare baring its fangs; neither will the nation be haunted by Hindutva again.

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

PERSPECTIVES

The enlightened electorate of India immersed in the tradition of democracy and pluralism made no mistake and put an end to a dark chapter of aberration that crept into their national life. The 14th Lokshava election resulted neither in the victory of Congress or Sonia Gandhi. It was the triumph of India as envisioned by Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Nehru and Moulana Azad.

Within a decade it was at the doorstep of Delhi's citadel of power and briefly tasted it in 1998.

After the 13th Lok Sabha election in 1999 it's man, a redoubtable Vajpayee returned to South Block in flying colours at the head of 24-party National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Behind the facade of BJP-led NDA it was, in fact, the Sangh Parivar including the RSS of which none other than Vajpayee had once been an 'activist', that started

uphold the country's multi-cultural ethos and democratic egalitarianism as the rampart of Indian polity and insisted on a Hindu majoritarian rule. The RSS pushed the BJP-led government at least to adopt an idiom of governance that would ultimately serve their larger project of establishing a Hindu Rashtra. Nehruvian dream of a modern, liberal and secular India came crashing down.

During the tenure of 13th Lok Sabha which ran its full term as the

initiated a hate campaign in Gujarat under an infamous Narendra Modi, the state's chief minister-directly responsible for independent India's worst communal carnage after 1992 Mumbai riots in the wake of Babri Mosque demolition. Earlier India's miniscule Christian community suffered persecution of Sangh Parivar whose brutality in the killing of Father Staines and his children in remote Orissa leprosy centre stirred the Indian conscience.

and human rights activists some of the persecution perpetrated by Modi government were halted in Gujarat but the BJP's diabolical agenda of capitalising on its achievements in Gujarat continued through 14th Lokshava election.

During the crises for communal harmony even earlier India's media, politicians and intellectuals stood firm in defence of secularism. Even the people from among the majority community played a remarkable role in

How prudent is Sonia's decision?



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

Definitely, the Indian political scene is being marked by dramatic developments centering the national elections and the post-poll scene particularly about the new leader of the country. Certain events can be seen just as anti-climax and contrary to the expectations running counter to the logical developments. The outcome of the elections came as a big surprise to most while the job of new prime minister has not gone to the person who was widely tipped for this coveted position of the world's largest democracy. And paradoxically, this too happened as the person chosen unanimously to form the new government herself declined the position.

She created a history in contemporary times by distancing herself from power even though the party she so assiduously led in a critical juncture is heading the coalition government. Sonia Gandhi, the undisputed leader of the Indian National Congress which has won most seats as a single party, left all stunned. Her gesture saw emotional supporters wailing, resorting to strikes, threatening to resign en masse from Congress working committee and some even to shoot themselves unless she and only she became the new leader of the nation fulfilling their aspirations.

Sonia herself broke down in emotion watching the avalanche of love but did not budge from the decision. She said it is inner soul that has dictated her to remain away from the premiership and this is in the best of the interest for the

country and people. Supporters began to reconcile with the reality that she would not reconsider the decision and India would have a new prime minister who is not from the famous political Nehru family that has led the Congress and ruled India for most time after independence.

She proposed the name of a senior party leader, who is known for his ability as a good administrator particularly in the areas of economy and also for impeccable integrity. Dr.

ruling and strong coalition led by a charismatic leader upsetting all predictions, she pulled herself off even after being invited by the president to form the government.

Several likely reasons are being cited for the decision and foremost of them is the relentless accusations by stubborn critics against her foreign origin as she was born in Italy. Many thought such accusations revolving the foreign origin issue would be set at rest once the

across political divide lest they are not looked down upon by many outside as mean and parochial.

We in Bangladesh feel proud when persons of our origin can represent nations like the United States as ambassador abroad or Britain appoints a Bangladeshi or birth as its high commissioner to this country. They are now their citizens and succeeded in climbing to important positions by sheer ability and skill. Such democratic countries

and mother-in-law, at the hands of assassins and she herself had been under intense attack from the rabid critics.

Another line of speculation is that her daughter Priyanka and son Rahul persuaded their mother not to take official position on security reasons since quarters bent upon opposing her as prime minister may spare no efforts to liquidate her physically. The fears may not be unfounded particularly for the fact

also apply in some form in Sonia's case.

It is possible that Sonia may become Indian prime minister at a stage when there will be less acrimony and time more propitious for her. She could have become prime minister when Congress riding in the crest of the sympathy of Rajiv's killing won the elections and formed the government in 1991. Sonia rejected appeals from Congress for becoming both PM and party chief and instead decided to remain recluse to politics. She did join politics formally when the Congress was in dire strait. For a person for whom going to power was a cakewalk earlier it is not difficult to also reject power once again. Her political life is marked by both thorns and roses. But he has brought to the fore the much valued dictum that "politics is not necessarily to enjoy power but serve people".

Even politicians of advanced democracies, let alone of democracies like ours, can take lesson from Sonia's case for the sake of people and nation. It is difficult to count on absolute integrity but it is possible to count on absolute infallibility. Sonia Gandhi, the "foreigner" from a small township in Italy, who landed in India through sheer marriage many years ago and was known for no lust for politics or power, has written a splendid chapter which has few parallels in history. At least for this she would be remembered admirably regardless how she fares in the future. Euphoria over her much applauded decision may fade with the passage of time but the example set by her would always remain shining -- not like "shining India" of the out-going government which boasted of developments during its tenure but that did not reach most Indians and the slogan cost the ruling coalition heavily in the polls.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior journalist.

MATTERS AROUND US

Even politicians of advanced democracies, let alone of democracies like ours, can take lesson from Sonia's case for the sake of people and nation. It is difficult to count on absolute integrity but it is possible to count on absolute infallibility. Sonia Gandhi, the "foreigner" from a small township in Italy, who landed in India through sheer marriage many years ago and was known for no lust for politics or power, has written a splendid chapter which has few parallels in history.

Manmohan Singh's choice as the new prime minister was accepted by Congress and its allies since it has come from no less a person than Sonia herself.

In democracies, instances are really too rare that the main leader winning elections has turned down the opportunity of enormous power or voluntarily quit key position. Malaysia's prime minister Dr. Mahathir Mohammad certainly earned admiration when he chose to retire as prime minister allowing others in the party to adorn the position. West Bengal's chief minister Jyoti Basu did the same a few years ago. But there is a distinct difference between their cases and that of Sonia Gandhi's. Dr. Mahathir hang up his gloves when he was in the late seventies and Basu called it a day from official position when in his late eighties. Both enjoyed power for more than two decades. But in Sonia's case she has been an opposition leader ever since she threw her hat into the ring of active politics and was waiting in the wings for power. When this golden opportunity came after beating a

elections are over, since Indian constitution says any citizen of the country can occupy any high office of the nation. The mandate was clear, it was won by Sonia and her Congress party. But the dust did not settle and the staunch critics kept the pot boiling despite a verdict disfavoring them and some even went to the extent of saying that they would resign from parliament or shave off head (a woman leader) if Sonia (a foreigner!) became prime minister.

Such ridiculous and undemocratic attitude from established politicians in India makes a mockery of their standard as far as the values of democracy and dignity in public life is concerned. If Indian origin Mahendra Chowdhury can become prime minister in Fiji, an Indian Sikh can become prime minister of the prestigious Vancouver province in Canada, why some one cannot hold high office in India just because of foreign origin and that too after being accepted by the people through popular mandate? Indians as a whole should demonstrate greater maturity on this issue cutting

deserve laurels for these decisions and we should take our hats off in big tribute to them. But why did some political forces in India fail here? Indeed, it is a sordid story!

Sonia probably thought that she should not step into the shoes of prime minister howsoever illogical and funny is the observation of the opponents on the "foreigner issue" and thus did not want to divide the nation at a crucial time. And in the process she has taken wind out of the opposition sails -- also in the post-election situation. This is a remarkable demonstration of maturity of political acumen. Veteran communist leader Jyoti Basu had remarked before the elections that he would support Sonia for premiership because he believed she learned a good deal of politics in short time.

One can find justification in Sonia's decision to keep away from power although this can also be argued strongly that the verdict in favour of Congress was mainly for the reason that people wanted to see her as the prime minister because she lost husband

that the children have lost their father Rajiv Gandhi, who was assassinated in 1991. However, it is implausible to think that a seasoned political family can attach too much to security while being in public life.

No doubt there is plethora of accolades for Sonia for taking a unconventional, courageous and morally high decision to keep away from power personally, but this may also have its pitfalls since some may see this as erroneous when viewed from another perspective. Some years ago, Jyoti Basu was named as the prime minister of the United Front government but his CPM party disapproved and consequently less known H.D. Deve Gowda became the prime minister as a dark horse. In retrospect, many felt that had a leader like Basu's stature become the prime minister, the UF government would not have probably fallen halfway through its term and communal forces would not have got the chance to come to power. Basu himself had described the party decision as a "blunder". Only time can say whether this may

OPINION

Our 'home-grown' democracy

MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

In present day Bangladesh, the term 'democracy' has lost almost all of its liberal characters and has been bestowed with some new names: moderate Muslim, predatory, home-grown etc. It is, however, the liberal democracy with which the nation began its journey as an independent state in 1971. Liberal democracy disappeared from Bangladesh after the military coups and counter coups and military-cum-civilian politicians grabbing power in 1975. The military-led rule, however, ended when people power toppled General Ershad from government in 1990. In 1991, the nation once again embraced liberal democracy with the adoption of a Westminster style parliamentary form of government. Since 1991 the nation has witnessed two democratically elected governments led by two major parties, the BNP and AL. In the 2001 general election, the BNP formed government with an alliance of three minor parties. In this commentary, the intention is firstly to examine the term 'democracy' from the present context of

Bangladesh, and secondly, to argue how the major political parties deliberately or otherwise have humiliated and mutilated the rules of 'liberal' democracy over the period of the last 13 years.

Liberal democracy: Grugel provided a minimalist definition (*Democratisation: A Critical Introduction*, 2002): "Democratisation is the regular holding of clean elections and the introduction of basic norms (for example, the absence of intimidation, competition from at least two political parties, and an inclusive suffrage) that make free election possible. A slightly more inclusive definition would also encompass the introduction of liberal individual rights (freedom of assembly, religious freedom, a free press, freedom to stand for public office and so on". If we take this theoretical interpretation of a liberal democracy into consideration, by all measures it is evident that in present Bangladesh is nowhere near to attaining all these democratic values.

Moderate Muslim democracy: Former US President Bill Clinton paid a state visit to Bangladesh in 2000. During his visit Bill Clinton dubbed Bangladesh as a moderate

Muslim democracy (MMD). Conceptually, there is no place for such a term in democracy literature, except that the Oval Office awarded this so-called honour to Bangladesh because, as a Muslim majority nation, the country has two female leaders, who by turn have been elected Prime Minister and Opposition Leader from 1991. According to the Oval Office, both Turkey and Indonesia are also moderate Muslim democracies since these countries have had in the past and still do have female heads of governments. President Bush's administration maintains a similar view on MMD.

According to Robison (*What Sort of Democracy? Predatory and Neo-Liberal Agendas in Indonesia*, 2002), in Indonesia, "the new democracy is dominated by the same broad alliances and coalitions of state power and social interest that dominated the Soeharto regime". One could also argue that Bangladesh has also been following Indonesia's footsteps. The predatory form of democracy has made Bangladesh politics a politics for elites. It appears that almost four-fifths of the total (300) members of the current parliament

have an established business and military background. The major reason for such a transformation was due to both the BNP (to a greater extent) and the AL (to a lesser extent) being keen on nominating those candidates who have the capacity to spend large sums of money in the electioneering process.

Home-grown democracy: The literal meaning of this term is obvious to all: Some thing grown on home soil or produced without copying or having any influence from outside. It can, however, safely be said that Bangladesh has its own style brought in progressively by the BNP government over 1991-96, the AL government over 1996-2001 and the BNP-alliance from 2001 to the present.

Let us identify, firstly, the major features of the 'home-grown' democracy that has evolved out of the so called democratic practices since 1991: parliamentary democracy has been largely ineffective; religion has become a part of democratisation under the present BNP-alliance government, compromising and, in some cases, destroying the liberal process; power has been concentrated in the

hands of the prime minister due to the incompetence of some ministers; civil and police administrations have become politicised, creating a major crisis in maintaining law and order; minorities and political opponents have been persecuted and stripped of their rights. With these non-liberal features becoming normative in Bangladesh's democracy, one sees that this style of democracy has grown out of Bangladesh's own soil.

How have we arrived at this point? The major sources are not difficult to identify, however, if one examines the three democratically elected regimes that came into being after the 1990 people power movement.

BNP regime (1991-96): The first five-year term of Begum Zia as Prime Minister was marred by unprecedented and unexpected political unrest and chaos. The unrest was triggered by the government's unnecessary manipulation of a by-election outcome at Magura. The government of Begum Zia came into direct loggerheads with the opposition AL, on the outcome of two more by-elections held at Manikgonj and Mirpur. By this time, the AL realised

that the incumbent BNP was not genuine in its resolve to institute a liberal electoral process, and thus the Opposition resorted to violent protest (numerous hartals). Magura, Manikgonj and Mirpur have been considered as the beginning of the end of liberal democracy in Bangladesh. As a result the seeds were sown of Bangladesh-style 'home-grown' democracy. It remains a mystery, why the BNP as a popular party in 1991 made such a move to crush the opposition. If these by-elections were even lost, the party no way would have lost a majority in the parliament.

AL regime (1996-2001): Begum Zia's government, however, paid a heavy price in the next general election held in 1996. The BNP was thrown out of office and the AL came into power with the support of two minor parties led by General Ershad and ASM Rob. The AL government led by Sheikh Hasina although was making some progress in bringing political turmoil under control, but her government behaved exactly the same way the BNP did to run the by-elections and made the whole by-election process farcical. Again, it has remained a mystery why a popular and relatively elite-free

party such as AL needed to swallow the pills of the predecessor.

BNP-alliance regime (2001-present): In the 2001 general election, the AL faced the same music as did the BNP in 1996. The BNP-alliance brought down the AL from office by bagging a two-thirds majority in the parliament, an unprecedented defeat indeed. In the present term it has introduced a new dimension to the 'home-grown' democratic practices. It is now well known to the nation that the so called 'Hawa Bhaban' plays an important part in the affairs of the alliance government. The Opposition even claims that the BNP allegedly runs a parallel administration. This has been, however, denied by the BNP. It appears that, in such a denial, the government did not heed the opinion of the general public. However, a litmus test for the BNP-alliance on this allegation is fast approaching. What role it plays in the upcoming by-elections in Tejgaon and Munshiganj would be a matter of great interest to the nation. On another front, recently the alliance government has been humiliated by the development forum partners for failing to maintain

law and order and keep corruption at bay. Law and order reached such a low recently that a popular and honest sitting opposition member of parliament, Ahanasulabb Master, was assassinated in broad daylight in his home town. He was recognised as one of a few non-elite members in the parliament.

These days, two statements of our two leaders constantly haunt us. The late President General Zia once said, "I will make the politics difficult in this country" and in the last election, Begum Zia (then opposition leader), by pointing a finger to the opponents stated, "I will teach you a good lesson on the politics of votes" (*Vote Shikha Debo*). Indeed, they were right. The opposition, on the one hand, as finding politics hugely difficult under our 'home-grown' democracy, on the other hand, the PM certainly taught a good lesson by bringing 14th amendment to the constitution. This will transform our 'home-grown' democracy into a democracy for 'elites', via 45 female members of parliament.

Moazzem Hossain teaches in the Griffith University, Australia.