

Call off hartal

The AL must show greater sensitivity to public welfare

THE July 24 hartal call that the AL has refused to withdraw, despite the flood situation taking a critical turn, is a clear case of the party's narrow political vision getting the better of its concern for public welfare. It's an inhuman gesture that shows a high degree of insensitivity to the flood victims. The party should have called off the hartal as a matter of principle.

We again appeal to the AL high command to place the welfare of the people above partisan considerations. The reasoning that the flood-hit areas have been excluded from the hartal is a ridiculous one since it is not possible to identify such areas accurately. Moreover, fresh areas are being inundated every day. Finally, relief operations are being carried out from the unaffected places. So a strike is surely going to paralyse the operations that the victims are relying on.

The political expediency of the move is also highly questionable. What is not at all clear is how a party which claims to have a pro-people stand can call a hartal when a huge chunk of the population is grappling with a great deluge. Doesn't that negate the concern for people that the party expresses from time to time?

Even if the custodial death of Sumon is what the AL wants to highlight through calling a hartal, it is only likely that the exercise will be a counter-productive one.

People are in a desperate situation. And it is not the time when any political party should push forward its divisive agenda that will add to the sufferings of the flood victims. The parties, regardless of their political ideology and standing, should remain united at this hour of crisis and do as much as they can to lessen the miseries of the people. Hartal is a negative political tool that should not be used even under normal circumstances. And any attempt to enforce it during a humanitarian crisis must be condemned in unequivocal terms. The AL should see reason and call off the strike.

RAB operations

Reign in before it turns into a monster

WE had previously expressed our grave concern at the conduct of operations of the Rapid Action Battalions. A number of deaths, reportedly in their custody, were primarily the reasons for our warning. One death in the custody of a law enforcing agency is one too many, for any civilized society.

Regrettably we had another instance of RAB excess the other day, when it raided a wrong house, resulting in harassment and humiliation of the inmates not to mention reckless damage to property. Reportedly, RAB has expressed regret for their mistake, but one shudders at the prospect of the serious physical harm that could have come to the inmates.

It appears that RAB does not work under any prescribed or laid down procedure of operations. Had that been so, the commando style raid would have been avoided. While actions against criminals are welcome, what happened in this instance raises concerns in those that are law abiding and would not like to be subject to such ignominy and humiliation.

We feel that a special force such as the RAB must make hardened and wanted criminal their targets. Doing otherwise would be a misuse of important government resources. Our understanding is that some of the targets that the RAB has gone after could well have been left to the police to handle.

While we acknowledge the government's compulsions to invoke new measures and means to arrest the slide in the law and order situation, imprudence in the work of the law enforcing agencies must be avoided.

Anti-crime drive needs full cooperation of the common man and the law-abiding citizens. Ham handed operations will only lead to public frustration and loss of confidence in RAB, and there is a good chance that it will become a monster.

We suggest the government reign in RAB before it becomes so.

Remembering Tajuddin Ahmed on his 79th birth anniversary

A rare breed of pragmatic leader

MD. MATIUL ISLAM

I met Tajuddin for the first time on January 17, 1972, when I went to his official Hare Road residence to introduce myself as Finance Secretary, and the last time on July 7, 1975 when I went to his private Dharmondi residence to meet a former boss, for what turned out to be our last meeting. We started as strangers and parted as close associates.

Post-liberation December of 1971 was a difficult period for the Mujibnagar Government which moved to Dhaka on December 18, 1971. The law and order situation was bad - there was uncertainty, chaos, and confusion. It needed deft handling and pragmatism to bring order from out of the chaos. There were the Mujibnagar returnees, with high aspirations and little experience, vying to occupy key positions in the newly born State, there were those who deserted their posts in the government and went into hiding to express their solidarity with the liberation struggle and there were those experienced civil servants who served the East Pakistan Government until the fall of Dhaka and surrender of the occupation Army. And here was Tajuddin Ahmed, Prime Minister in the Mujibnagar Government, coming to the Secretariat to address those who never deserted their posts. Would he order cleansing of the Government of those who did not defect? Would he make a fresh start? There was apprehension, there was anxiety. Tajuddin belied all speculations. There was no recrimination, no threat of persecution, no mass dismissal, but a call to work unitedly, sincerely and devotedly for the new nation to build up a Sonar Bangla, the dream of Sheikh Mujib, still languishing in a Pakistani Jail in Lyallpur.

Tajuddin did not question the patriotism of those who did not desert their posts, nor did he ask for a test of their loyalty to the new state of Bangladesh. A pragmatic man, an enlightened politician, transition from Mujibnagar to Dhaka was made orderly and smooth.

A few days after Tajuddin took over as Finance and Planning Minister, a new crisis arose. The Prime Minister, on the advice of the Establishment Division, issued orders summarily terminating the services of about 30 senior civil officers on the ground that they received awards on the occasion of the Independence Day on August 14, 1971 and, therefore, should be considered collaborators. When I met Tajuddin with this news, he was already aware of it and had met the Prime Minister the previous night to intercede with him to withdraw the order. It was quite apparent that some over-zealous Mujibnagar returnees had misled the Prime Minister to make way for them to get quick promotions. The Prime Minister was not aware that the process of selection of awardees for 1971 started long before March 26 when the liberation struggle started and had nothing to do with the conduct of the officers between the period from March 26 and August 14 when the award was announced.

The Prime Minister, however, declined blanket withdrawal of the order, but agreed to set up a one-member committee with Dr. Kamal Hossain, the Law Minister, to review each case on its merits and submit its recommendation to the Prime Minister for reconsideration. To the best of my knowledge, the one member committee recommended all the cases for reinstatement.

The financial sector when I took over was in shambles, banking sector was in total disarray, no budget, no foreign exchange, and an empty exchequer. That I was the nominee of the Prime Minister for the job of Finance Secretary did not make my task easier. However, having served the East Pakistan Government as Secretary to various departments including Finance, I had developed a knack for taking quick and bold decisions and shoulder the responsibility that go with it. This approach helped the overall decision making process, but landed me in trouble with the Finance Minister on a few occasions.

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One such occasion was when, in my enthusiasm and sense of fairness, I introduced 'P' form for travel to India as was the requirement for travel to other countries. This created uproar and led Tajuddin to comment that I was driving a wedge between the two friendly countries of India and Bangladesh. The order had to be withdrawn, but only temporarily. On the other hand, Tajuddin was instrumental in including me in the Prime Minister's entourage for bilateral talks with Mrs. Indira Gandhi in Calcutta and advised me to make sure that I remained present during the talks.

Very often, Tajuddin faced dilemma between his responsibility as the Planning Minister when he was advised by the members of the Planning Commission, all of whom enjoyed the rank of Ministers, and his duties as a Finance Minister, when he had to take into consideration the view of the Finance Ministry, especially when the two opinions were contradictory. One such occasion was when, as the Planning Minister, he introduced a Cabinet Paper to break up EPIDC to which I did not subscribe. Tajuddin graciously permitted me to express my dissent in the Cabinet and did not contradict me. When I opposed the proposal to create 10 new Divisions in the restructured Planning Commission on the ground that this would create parallel policy making organs in the Government, he did not overturn my views, but suggested a compromise between the two extreme positions.

Tajuddin was a strict disciplinarian and dealt with labour union problems with a strong hand. Many a time, I accompanied him to Bangladesh Bank to confront the sometime unruly labour unions, but he never gave in to unreasonable and unjust demands. When the MD of a Nationalised Commercial Bank committed the indiscretion of approving a new pay scale for some of his staff members, under pressure from his union, in spite of specific instruction to the contrary from the Finance Ministry, Tajuddin accepted my recommendation to have the MD

removed the same day under PO. 9 and sent a strong signal to the banking sector that the Government would not yield to pressure.

A rare event of potential political embarrassment came when we introduced one-taka notes printed in Nasik Security Printing Press in India to replace the Pakistani notes in circulation. These notes were ordered to be printed before the Mujibnagar government moved to Dhaka. But no sooner were these notes introduced, than came the unholy campaign that this was an Indian ploy to undermine the economy of Bangladesh and the rumour that Nasik Press printed more notes than were ordered to be used by India to subvert the Bangladesh economy. One newspaper even dramatised this theory by publishing two one-taka notes side by side with the same number to prove the point that a large number of duplicate notes were under circulation. We both remained unmoved and merely pointed out that this could be achieved by printing the same note twice and did not prove the point that there were duplicate notes in circulation.

Unfortunately, however, the movement did not subside, but reached

such a crescendo that we finally decided to withdraw these notes by giving sufficient time to exchange them for one-taka notes printed in England. This satisfied some, but not all. There was criticism why we did not instantly demote, but gave time and opportunity for new printing and circulation of additional notes. Tajuddin gave a statement in the Parliament that if Indian printed one-taka notes returned to Bangladesh Bank exceeded the amount issued even by one taka, he would resign.

About ten days before the last date for exchange of one-taka notes, I received a call from the Prime Minister who said that visitors from the border areas reported that crores of one-taka notes were finding their way into Bangladesh from across the border and, therefore, it was necessary that the one-taka notes be demote immediately. I humbly pointed out that those reporting the incident never saw one-taka notes of one crore at a time and could easily confuse thousand with crore, although it was possible that some notes which earlier were sent out to pay for smuggled goods were coming in. I advised the Prime Minister that the extended period for exchange of

one-taka notes was granted since abrupt demote would only hurt the poor. The period, therefore, should not be shortened and the Prime Minister accepted my recommendation.

Bangladesh Bank recalled the notes returned, after expiry of the due date, and reported short receipt of notes of more than Tk 40 lakhs. Tajuddin's position was fully vindicated.

About a month ago, at the dinner table in my Gulshan home with Dr. Nurul Islam, the erstwhile Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission and some old colleagues, the topic of conversation came around Tajuddin. I narrated an incident where I withheld for one month execution of a written order by Tajuddin to suspend an officer and resubmitted the case for reconsideration, which he did. Dr. Islam asked me whether I would take such a liberty if the Minister in question was not Tajuddin. I kept quiet and my silence was more eloquent than my answer. I took advantage of Tajuddin's kind heart and the knowledge that he would not hurt anybody.

The writer is a former Finance Secretary.

An episode from history

MAHBUB UDDIN AHMED, BB

I met Mr. Tajuddin for the first time at mid-day on March 29, 1971, when he stopped at Jhenidah on his way towards the border. He had arrived at the residence of Mr. JKMA Aziz, the then MNA of Jhenidah, a small sub-divisional township on the north-western side of the then East Pakistan, already proclaimed independent Bangladesh by our great leader Sheikh Mujib, lying almost half-way between Jessore Cantonment and Kushtia District headquarters, where the marauding Pakistan army camped itself on March 26.

The fighting conglomerate at our encampment was formed by the local students, peasants, fishermen, officer, police, Ansars and Bengali members of EPR (now BDR) and the political leaders of southwestern region of Bangladesh who had decided to resist by all means, and to that effect an administrative unit was set up with Dr. Ashabul Haque, MNA of Chuadanga as the chief advisor and Major Abu Osman Chowdhury as the commander of Mukti Bahini southwestern command.

Mr. Aziz called me to his residence at about mid-day when he introduced me to two gentlemen. They had come all the way from Dhaka starting after midnight on March 25. On that fateful night Mr. Tajuddin had observed with his own eyes the burning of Dhaka under the cannons of Pakistani forces in the name of Operation Search Light, from the rooftop of a humble house in Mohamadpur where he was hiding on his way to an unknown destination, being told by Bangabandhu to leave him alone and wage war against the Pakistani junta.

The Pakistan army had used mortars, cannons, tanks and whatever other fire-power they had on the

police lines, on the paramilitary headquarters at Pilkhana (the then EPR headquarters), Dhaka University students halls, teachers quarters, and any places they thought could organise resistance. So they didn't spare the busters in Tejgaon nor the people of old Dhaka. Mr. Tajuddin was a witness to this holocaust and he was determined to destroy the invaders.

Therefore, with the first opportunity and between the darkness and light of dawn, he along with his comrade Barrister Amirul Islam, began a long journey across the country, starting from Mohamadpur on foot, by rickshaw, and on boat, having no rest and sometimes no food. In the process of this arduous journey he mingled with thousands of fleeing Bengalis whose destination was the same as his. In that long journey he remained incognito because at every juncture he could be arrested by the military network.

In this long journey he possibly had the first taste of rest at the house of Mr. Ashraf Ali Chowdhury, the MNA of Nawabganj. He had the good luck of riding a cart a certain distance from Faridpur to Kamarkhali. He was almost shot by friendly fire at Magura entry point where the Mukti Bahini had its monitoring check post, but was saved by one of the soldiers who identified him and brought him to the house of Mr. Sohrab Hosain at Magura. On midnight of the 28th, he had his first rest bath, food, and sleep in peace. Because from the borders of Magura, as he learnt from Mr. Sohrab Hosain, the entire land space all the way up to the border was free and under the control of the Mukti Bahini. Sohrab's wife prepared food by herself that night and entertained him. This Mr. Tajuddin fondly remembered when he met me in Jhenidah on the 29th.

When I reached the residence of Mr. Aziz, the first thing Mr. Tajuddin wanted to know was the situation

obtaining in the area and whether the road to India was safe. I told him that we had taken control of the entire area from Goaland to Meherpur and from the north of Jessore Cantonment to the outskirts of Kushtia town, and that the road all the way up to the border was under our control and totally free. I also informed him "Under the leadership of Major Osman we are here contemplating an attack on the Pakistani forces in Kushtia district headquarters and the people of Kushtia are with us."

I informed him that Dr. Ashabul Haque and Barrister Badal Rashid in Chuadanga, Shohiuddin at Meherpur, Raja Mia at Kushtia, and Rawshan Ali at Jessore were already in the forefront, fighting and organising war against the Pakistanis at the grassroots level, and that Nurul Kader Khan, the DC of Pabna, had also established contact with us. Having seen all the calamities, destruction, burning, death, injury, and helpless flight of millions towards unknown destiny, leaving all their possessions behind, I could visualise that our story and act of valiance enhanced his spirits and courage. Heat once got rid of his feeling of despair and disillusionment caused by the upsetting events since 25th night, and asked me to arrange for his safe disposal to the Indian border. Before I started going into that I asked him: "Where is Bangabandhu?"

"He is with us and leading our struggle," was all he said on the issue and urged me to continue finding ways to take them across the border incognito. I expressed my eagerness to do so without any problem, and after making the necessary preparations, put them in the back seat of my soft top Toyota jeep and drew the curtains so that nobody could see them.

The road to India was quite unmanageable as we had felled trees and cut trenches and blown up

bridges to stop the advance of the Pakistani Army. We had to take many detours through the paddy fields and uneven ground and even through small streams. Our journey had a short interlude mid-way at Chuadanga circuit house where the southwestern command of the Mukti Bahini was headquartered and we were supposed to meet Major Osman and Meherpur SDO Taufique-e-elahi Chowdhury.

When I reached the front of the headquarters, I got down and called and Taufique and Major Osman to come out and meet the two gentlemen who were inside my jeep. They exchanged views for some time, and Major Osman and Taufique explained the situation obtaining in the country and also their future plans, including the plan to attack Kushtia. Major Osman specially urged them to get support and help from India particularly with supply of arms and ammunition to combat the Pakistan army. Mr. Tajuddin was very excited and assured us that he would do everything possible to help us get Indian support.

The broken journey resumed within half an hour and this time Taufique led the way towards the border. We negotiated through kutcha roads and paddy fields dried by the heat of summer, and at least once we had to cross one canal. The canal had no bridge and we had no time to turn back to find an alternative way. Taufique called out local people, who knew him as the local SDO and many people from the village came running to help. They put planks across the stream, and then using ropes to tie up loose ends, finally shifted the load by the sheer muscle of the many young men who extended their helping hand.

Our vehicles were lifted finally accompanied by chanting of slogans like Joy Bangla, Tikka na Hukka, Hukka Hukka, Akta Duita Khan Dhara, Shakal Bikal Nasta Karo, and

similar slogans which every Bengali, fighting with arms or without, had on their lips. It was this courage and conviction of ordinary people that created our indomitable strength as a nation to wage a relentless war against the Pakistan army. I am sure it was this courage and fortitude that encouraged leaders like Mr. Tajuddin to fight out a long and arduous nine months of armed liberation struggle.

When we reached a place called Changkhali lying between the borders, we stopped under a big banyan tree surrounded by many smaller trees of all kinds, bushes, shrubs, and jungle. It was twilight time, getting darker by the advent of coming night. We stopped on a culvert in no man's land. The area was peaceful as no human habitation or movement of people could be found in the vicinity. Rather, the place was resounding with the sounds of nocturnal birds, snakes, and beasts, and was vibrating with the noise of the wind. It was a solitude which was deeply engrossing for the leaders who had only one thought in their mind, how to get the war going and how to organise the world in favour of the liberation war.

In spite of the situation as it was, we had to leave both of them and go towards the Indian outpost to meet our contacts. Halfway through, we encountered Captain Mahapatra of Indian BSF who was sent out by his commanding officer to escort the VIPs. Apparently, an SOS call sent by Taufique from Meherpur to his counterpart on the other side had been taken seriously. In fact, his call had alerted the Indian border post. In the meantime we had also learnt that the Indian government had alerted the entire border to receive all important political leaders of Bangladesh of the time, who might be seeking shelter, refuge, or assistance. They were fully aware of the fighting that erupted between the Bengalis and the Pakistanis since the night of March 25.

We returned where we had left Mr. Tajuddin and his companion, and being escorted by Captain Mahapatra, reached Indian BSF border post at around 7:30 in the evening. There we were received by the Commanding Officer of the sector and after brief introduction Mr. Tajuddin was given a makeshift guard of honour by the members of the BSF of India on behalf of Indian government. To us it was a moment of great pride and elation, a sense of unparalleled excitement. We felt that we were really the representatives of an independent state.

After the short formalities, we were given some refreshments. In my mind, the most urgent matter now was to receive arms and ammunition because our mind was set for attacking the Pakistan army in Kushtia. So, I reminded Mr. Tajuddin to see if BSF could give us some firearms. On my request Mr. Tajuddin raised the issue to the commandant. He said in reply: "We have no clearance from central government to give arms and ammunition to Mukti Bahini, so I shall have to send signal to the central government before giving you anything. However, I have some old arms of Czechoslovakian origin and some hand grenades, which I can part with, if you so desire."

We were hungry for arms and anything coming by was welcome. So, they delivered two LMGs and three dozen hand grenades. To my knowledge this was the first consignment of arms and ammunition we received from the Indians in our war efforts. Having received the arms in good grace, it was time to bid farewell. After exchange of good wishes we left Mr. Tajuddin in the care of the BSF and they were whisked off to

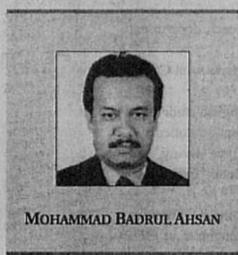
Calcutta the same night, and their long journey leading to the war of liberation and its conclusion started.

The writer is a freedom fighter.



Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed and President Nazrul Islam of provisional government among freedom fighters.

Is democracy going dud?



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THE sons, daughters, and wives are rising to power, their right to rule coming to them like inheritance. When Hafeez Al Assad of Syria died, his son took over as the country's new President. When Sri Lankan Prime Minister Bandernaike was assassinated, his wife became the Prime Minister, and now his (her) daughter rules the country as its President. Even in pluralistic and modern Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew's son, who is already the Deputy Prime Minister, is all set to become the city-state's next Prime Minister. In India, one of the largest democracies in the world, the Nehrus have ruled for generations until recently their foreign-born daughter-in-law refused to become the Prime

Minister of her adopted land. It seems power is increasingly running in the families. Even though Sonia Gandhi decided not to become the Prime Minister, that does not mean her daughter Priyanka or son Rahul shall not seek power to rule India in future. In the United States George Bush, the son of a former President became President in a controversial election. Hillary Clinton, the wife of former US President Bill Clinton, is eyeing the presidential office in either 2008 or 2012. In our own country, the daughter and the wife have ruled so far, while their sons are said to be waiting in the wings. In Pakistan, Bhutto's daughter became two-time Prime Minister of her country, still haunting its future like an evil charm that does not go away.

All in all, democracy is showing the dynastic signs as power changes hand, not because of political experience, but because of birthright. In most cases, the change is taking place with popular consent, people voting for their modern-day queens, princes, or princesses, thereby somewhat reviving monarchy within the democratic process. The government of the people, by the people, and for the people is still valid, except that people are not so much with their governments any more. In most countries of the world, including the

United States, hardly half of the registered voters go to the polls. If eternal vigilance is the price of liberty, people are looking tired and harassed.

What is happening to the popular will, which is the power of the people to choose their government? It took many centuries and sacrifice of countless lives before the power to rule people would be ultimately

bands' pyres, the wedding of a spinster to a tree, the lashing of women for infidelity, the superstitions and the prejudices, which plagued humanity, and impounded and still continue to impound human freedom, centuries after centuries, came in the long tradition of complicity between the court of the kings and the church of the clergy. The winds of the Reformation and the

ownership.

So the ordinary man finally got the extraordinary power to pick and choose who should rule him. Thus the oppressed man got his chance to become the master of his destiny, because those who would rule, must now rule by his consent. Government was no longer a destiny, but a destination, freedom ringing in its duty and obligation to guarantee equality

rights and consent, concentrating power in his hand, in his sons, cousins, clan, and cronies. Tyranny makes power a private ambition, while democracy makes it a common aspiration. Tyranny is acquisition of power by one man, whereas democracy is its distribution amongst many. Tyranny turns power into brutal force, and democracy turns it into collective strength.

terms. Repeated power, whether in the person of a ruler, his wife, son, daughter, or any other member of his family, has the tendency to create the arrogance that diminishes democracy.

Needless to say, the power to rule people is neither legacy nor inheritance. A ruler can be popular, but his popularity is not transferable. That is where democracy is different from autocracy and monarchy, which predicate on the assumption that popularity is transferable down the bloodline in perpetuity. It is not right for the same reason the peasant philosophy is wrong, the son of a President does not necessarily have to be a President if the son of a peasant does not necessarily have to be a peasant.

But this is not to say that democracy does not allow two or more rulers in the same family. Franklin Roosevelt and Theodore Roosevelt were related, so were the two John Adams who became U.S. Presidents. If there can be many doctors, lawyers, actors, and other professionals in the same family, so can be leaders, presidents, prime ministers, and ministers. But they must come through the due process and political discipline in their own right, instead of being chosen for blood connection with charismatic leaders.

That was the way of the dynasties,

the Bourbons of France, the Romanovs of Russia, the Mings of China, the Palas of ancient Bengal, the Mughals of India or the Pahlavis of Iran. Most dynasties marked their succession line in alphanumeric order like the Bourbons who ran from Louis I to XVI as if power was like movies, which could run in sequels from one generation to another.

Democracy's greatest gift to people is that nobody can take power for granted, and it gives people the ultimate power to decide whether a leader should return to power after finishing his term. This is the right that has been earned for them after many discourses, revolutions, bloodsheds, and tears. This is their only hope against other alternatives, which create monsters and tyrants, who use power like a blank check.

For all practical reasons, only a handful of people will continue to run governments because every citizen cannot hold public office. But one of the greatest challenges of humanity has been to determine how many should be effectively ruled by few while the power of government remains with them. Democracy is the dynasty of the people. They should resist by all means if anybody tries to take it from them.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

CROSS TALK

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vested in their own hands. Dennis Diderot epitomised that struggle when he proclaimed in the run-up to the French Revolution that freedom was not possible unless the last king was strangled with the entrails of the last priest.

The inquisitions of the Middle Ages, the burning of heretics at the stake, the gladiators of Rome, the immolation of brides at their hus-

bands brought a new awakening. Neither the kings nor the clerics were necessary to act as intermediaries between man and his God. The sculptures, paintings, music, and literature extolled the beauty of the human body and placed man at the helm of his own destiny. Democracy came afterwards to create governments as institutions to instill and facilitate that sense of freedom and

of man in the eye of law, while giving him the opportunity to exercise his inalienable God-given rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Let us forget, democracy was created to save man from tyranny, and tyranny is nothing but consolidation of power in one hand, clan, or family. Saddam was a tyrant, because he ruthlessly ruled his people without any respect for their

Freedom and ownership are the key elements of democracy and absence of them is tyranny. People must be free to exercise the power given to them and they must have the will to guard that freedom at any cost. But that does not happen when the sons, daughters, and wives of charismatic leaders are voted to power. Perhaps it is for the same reason that the US presidency is limited to two