

What happens next?

FARID BAKHT

WHAT if the plot had succeeded in its mission? Imagine the situation on August 22nd, a day after the carnage outside the Awami League offices. The top opposition leadership wiped out. Where would we stand today?

It does not need much to believe that the party activists would have been on the rampage. Cars and buses would have been torched. Thousands of people would have been out on the streets. In one word: chaos. More martyrs would have been created as jumpy police and paramilitaries would have fired live bullets to quell the situation, making things worse. Shopkeepers would keep the shutters down for several days. No one would have ventured to go to factories or offices. A perfect hartal. As the political temperature rose, the government would have become increasingly frantic. How to react? The opposition would be effectively rudderless and out of control. Any "leaders" lucky to escape the grenades would not have the stature to command the party workers. A national emergency would have been declared and there would have been no option but for a reluctant military to

come in and douse the flames.

But then what?

The BNP alliance would not have been able to withstand the pressure and the alliance would have shattered. Legitimacy would have disappeared and things would not somehow "return to normal." It is difficult to envisage the present regime being able to stay in power.

How have we reached this juncture? A government elected with a two-thirds majority and 46 per cent of the vote less than three years ago, shunted out of power.

The fevered speculation gripping our middle class is all about who and how? One day, one newspaper writes that grenades were lobbed from the roof of a high building. The next day we hear that they might have been thrown by infiltrators standing a few feet away from the trucks. If the previous investigations are anything to go by, we will never know the full story.

What happened to the flood?

This is all put in perspective when we realise that the bombing occurred just as the flood waters receded from Dhaka. Besides photo-ops of a VIP distributing bags

of "relief goods," the flood has now dropped down the political agenda. It might as well not have happened.

For the millions trying to recover their lives, trying to get the Aman crop cultivated, trying to rebuild their homes, it's about how they can make it through the winter and then through the lean season to April when the winter crop is harvested.

It's difficult to grasp statistics that

The game in town now is about jostling for the inevitable change. A de-stabilisation campaign seems to be in motion to bring about a radical shift in power. Bangladesh without the Awami League is like India without the Congress Party. It would seem that both the BNP and Awami League are facing their greatest crisis where their existence as the "natural" parties of power is in

question. New rules are being written.

Tin-pot movements are sprouting up and negotiations are taking place for "the future." That is, the future for individual personalities. No one is seriously talking about the future of the people or the country. They may mutter about a "failed state" but the mainstream debate stops at: "we must get rid of terrorists and corruption." How would they do that? They never spell out the details. They are looking for a magic wand.

That will not come from some handover. Even if a "national gov-

ernment" were to come into power with a sprinkling of prominent figures, that would still beg the question: how would the historic and structural problems of this country be solved?

There would be an initial honeymoon of twelve months. With the departing politicians would go their allied terrorists and extortionists. As we saw in Operation Cleanheart,

back of this sector, would be feeling the pinch. Even a 15 per cent contraction would be significant to shops and the rural-urban economy. Add on top the forced closure of state owned enterprises. Add the growing frustrations of the young, educated, would-be professionals, clutching worthless certificates. And you get to see a serious unemployment problem in the city. One

chances of getting it right are remote. Assets would be signed away cheaply as our "negotiators" do not have the skill, experience, or willingness to strike a bargain, reasonable for both sides.

Finally we might consider two things:

One: people did not pour onto the streets in support of the Awami League. People were shocked and scared. Though they condemned the deaths and maiming on August 21, they did it in the privacy of their homes and felt no need to show their support for the party. That is a reflection of their disgust with the current state of politics and hartals.

Two: no alliance, movement, or group has come up with a convincing vision of how they are going to take this country forward

As regards new alliances, the alternative may be clear in the sense that we may get to understand who and which groups are likely to take advantage. However, unless they can lead and provide hope to the 140 million, not just the 5 to 10 million middle class, then they will get into lasting trouble.

Today, we can pretend there are parties, government and opposition. It makes good political theatre. Instead, in the future, we may see a

harsher landscape of secular forces ranged against religious forces, or our own version of a Nepal situation with an ungovernable countryside and power limited to the main cities and towns. Impossible?

Contrived or not, who could predict that 5,000 armed militia would be riding in motorbikes into a city, under police protection disregarding direct orders from the Prime Minister, following a curiously named "Bangla Bhai" and fighting a guerilla style war against communists?

We are now wondering where this will go next. Perhaps our equivalent of a Twin Towers? We have already seen threats against our airports and planes. A spectacular event? Something so terrible that it would force a regime change?

2004 should teach us one thing. Be prepared to believe that anything can happen, because it probably will.

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From William Franklin to Omar Hazim: An Islamic American story

DR. LIAQUAT ALI KHAN

WILLIAM Franklin grew up in Kansas City in the 1940s and 1950s, a time when American apartheid was vigorously enforced, when blacks were excluded from white neighbourhoods, schools, theatres, and churches. William remembers his parents warning him not to wander off to the South side of the 27th street where the whites lived and where black boys could be arrested for trespassing. "Resentment, not really," said William, "for that was the way of life back then."

Back then, however, William did see the ugliness of racism. At 15, he was arrested when a white policeman was killed in the city and the authorities rounded up more than a hundred black men. William, like most other detainees, was innocent and let go. At 17, while using a restroom in Mississippi, William remembers, how a man banged at the restroom door and yelled: "This restroom is for whites only. It's not for -----!" The blank was filled with

the n-word, a word of racial contempt and hatred, commonly used to address a black manany black man. Back then, almost every black person had to endure such micro-aggressions almost every day.

Growing up in Kansas City, William would go to "their" church with his brothers and sisters. In the church everyone was black except the image of Jesus. William noted the blonde hair, blue eyes, and the white skin of Jesus, a figure he worshipped as God, but a figure that looked, said William, awfully similar to slave owners who forcibly abducted men, women and children from Africa, shipped them to America, depriving the imported cargo of its cultural and religious heritage, denuding the newcomers of their language, personal histories, even African names. A gradual realisation that American Christianity has been tainted with racism sowed the seeds of William's transformation.

At 18, William dropped his last name, Franklin, an English name that, he thought, represented not him but some past white master.

Discarding such last names was common when men joined the Nation of Islam. This black organisation was launched by a mysterious foreigner, called Fard Muhammad. After espousing that black is divine, and leaving the Nation in the

American racism on its head. For the next fifteen years, William donned black suits and bow ties, led the Nation in various ministerial capacities, and later met Elijah on a monthly basis. Black pride liberated William's mind and freed his soul.

first changed his name to Omar Hazim. A couple of years later, Omar went to Hajj and for the first time in his life saw a sea of Muslims of all colours, races, and ethnicities. Black eyes glimpsed divinity in brown and blue eyes. And blue

black or white. "There is nothing that resembles God." This powerful message of the Quran transformed Omar's mind and soul, which had been marred twice by racism, first white then black. Discarding all race-based views of God and reli-

the Imam.

Imam Omar Hazim's khutbas often emphasize the Islamic ethic of patience and tolerance. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) faced all forms of adversity, false accusations, and threats to his life. But during this ordeal, the Imam reminds the audience, Prophet remained an inexhaustible source of tolerance, patience, and kindness. Imam Hazim's own life experiences, now spanned over sixty one years, has taught him the wisdom of staying the course with patience while life reveals its mysteries. And as a Muslim, he firmly believes that God is with those who practice perseverance and patience (Quran 2:153).

Unfortunately, says Imam Hazim, Muslim countries fail to practice patience and tolerance. In Pakistan, he points out, the bloody feud between Shias and Sunnis is mind boggling. In Afghanistan, Iraq, Bangladesh, and Sudan, Muslims are killing Muslims. The subjugation of women, including honour killings, has no place under the liberating principles of the Quran and the Sunna. These and other stories,

even when exaggerated in the Western press, undermine Islam's teachings of compassionate equality, human dignity, and authentic tolerance.

True to his words, Imam Omar Hazim leads the Islamic Center of Topeka with an open and generous heart. Over the years, many Americans have accepted Islam at the mosque. Even newborns, including my own two sons, listen to the Imam as he chants the first adhan in their ears. In a spirit of mutual respect, American Jews, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, all are invited to attend khutbas, prayers, and iftar dinners during the Ramadhan. Reciting suras of the Quran with accruing facility, the suras that tell the stories of Ibrahim, Moses, and Jesus, the suras that recognize the dignity of all colours and languages, and the suras that forbid compulsion in religion Imam Omar Hazim leads prayers attended by blacks and whites, men and women, Arabs and non-Arabs, Sunnis and Shias.

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hands of Elijah Muhammad, Fard disappeared. The Nation began to believe that Fard was God. As a ritual of worship, Fard's picture was hung in every member's house, including William's.

The Nation gave William a new way of thinking. William now started to believe, as did most members of the Nation, that blacks were noble and divine, whereas whites were wicked and evil. Fard had turned

Lurking behind this uplifting experience, however, was a disturbing irony. Fard, the Nation's God, was not a black man. Fard's white complexion most apparent in the picture hung in William's house belied the belief that white is evil. The change was therefore inevitable.

In 1975, under the leadership of Warith Deen Muhammad, the Nation began to move towards traditional Islam. So did William. He

eyes were lowered with as much humility as were brown and black eyes. And at the conclusion of Hajj, all men shaved their heads whether the color of their hair was black or blond. Through this experience of universal brotherhood, Omar could no longer accept that any race is inferior or superior.

On embracing traditional Islam, Omar removed Fard's picture from the wall. God is not man, nor is He

gion, Omar now devoted himself to learning more about Islam.

But his learning of Islam was not abstract. Omar has been a professional mason all his life. He first built Nation's temples. Omar now employs his masonry skills to construct mosques. He built a mosque in Kansas City, the Inshirah masjid, not far from the South side of 27th street. He has also built the Islamic Center of Topeka where he is now

The Democrats' toughness gap

JONATHAN ALTER

SHORTLY before the 1992 election, a World War II veteran approached Newsweek and other major media outlets with an unsubstantiated story about how he said he saw President George H.W. Bush strafing unarmed Japanese fishermen in the Pacific when both men were young Navy fliers. None of us published or broadcast the explosive allegations until after the election, and if we had, Bill Clinton's campaign indicated it would have denounced them. The same thing happened in 2000, when a book called *Fortunate Son* alleged youthful illegal activities by George W. Bush. No one from Al Gore's cam-

paign would touch the story until later, and the book was withdrawn by the publisher.

Contrast those with the case of the Swift Boat veterans, whose thoroughly discredited accounts of John Kerry's Vietnam service have been treated with respect and whose book is now a best seller. While Kerry has repudiated an ad made by MoveOn.org that ridicules Bush and Dick ("I had other priorities") Cheney for skipping a war they hypocritically favoured, Bush has repeatedly refused to do the same on his side, which gives the news media license to take the whole thing seriously. Bush told The New York Times last week that he thought Kerry was telling the truth, but he still wouldn't denounce the

ads attacking Kerry as a liar. (His call for a ban on all "527" independent ads is a transparent dodge.) So much for any sense of decency. The man who was once an inept right-wing president but a nice guy is now just an inept right-wing president.

Of course, Bush's nastiness is in the tradition of Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, who used surrogates to accuse each other of sexual improprieties, and scores of candidates who followed. For all the hand-wringing, going negative works, as Bush's uptick in the polls indicates. So if playing rough is just part of politics, why are the Democrats so much worse at it? Even when they win, Democrats never quite close the toughness gap.

One example: Ten years ago,

Kerry briefly considered supporting a 50-cent-a-gallon gas tax, then withdrew the idea. Bush now has an ad up savaging him for it. Three weeks ago, Bush floated his own trial balloon favouring a national sales tax. When he withdrew it, the Kerry campaign said, "Oh, OK," and declined a chance to air ads blasting the president for planning to tax every shopping trip to the mall.

Part of the explanation lies in the DNA of the two parties. When FDR's critics lambasted him as a "dictator" and "traitor," he responded with brilliant humour, lampooning the GOP for going after "my dog Fala." But his Democratic heirs mostly lacked either the light touch or the instinct for the jugular, which is one reason so few have made it to the White House. In the last half century, every Republican ticket except one has contained Richard Nixon, Bob Dole or one of the Bushes, all of whom proved expert with the shiv. (The one exception, 1964, is not coincidentally the only time Democrats,

led by LBJ, played rougher.)

Usually the toughness gap is the Democrats' own fault. Because liberals are temperamentally self-critical, they tend to see more grays than black-and-whites. Republicans are better at closing ranks. If Kerry were the GOP candidate this year, hardly anyone in his party would be trashing him privately or predicting defeat, as some Democrats are doing.

A related contrast comes in the way the parties address their own constituencies. Republicans offer "red meat," a sense that they share the resentments of their audience. Democrats, schooled in political correctness, tiptoe around their friends, ever anxious not to offend. This conditions them to be more defensive and reactive toward their enemies.

The year 2004 was supposed to be when Democrats found their fighting spirit. Howard Dean's early success convinced Kerry and the rest of the Washington Democrats that only a feisty, give-'em-hell

campaign had any chance of success. But Kerry's one tough race, against moderate Massachusetts Gov. Bill Weld in 1996, may not have fully prepared him for the task. While Clinton faced real conservatives in the Hobbesian world of Southern politics, Kerry hails from a state where Michael Dukakis was seen as a tough guy.

If Kerry loses, the Washington Democratic establishment may be done, too. Fire-breathing liberals, mirror images of the ideologues on the right, will take over the party, likely dooming it to yet more defeat in a country that is fundamentally moderate. Kerry can prevent that by finding his voice and finally crystallising his indictment of Bush

in a few words that voters can actually remember. None of them need be about the Vietnam War.

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