

Germany after elections Angela Merkel's 'mission impossible'

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

TRUTH is, without doubt, sometimes stranger than fiction. Thirty years ago, I had crossed from East Berlin to West Berlin on a shopping trip with my wife and our little son. We were made to wait a long time while the East German security officials had checked and rechecked our passports, visas and Polish diplomatic identity cards (I was at that time posted in our Embassy in Warsaw) to ensure that no East German was escaping to the other side. We definitely did not look like Germans, but they were not taking any chances. As we waited at the Berlin Wall, I could not envisage that it would come down in my lifetime. Yet it did, and within fifteen years of that trip.

Now the Germans have sprung another big surprise on the world. Germany will have a lady Chancellor for the first time, Angela Merkel. Merkel has another first to her credit: she is the first Chancellor of unified Germany to hail from former communist-ruled East Germany.

Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) won the September 18 Parliamentary elections in Germany by a very narrow margin. Along with its sister party Christian Social Union (CSU), it managed to get 226 seats in the 614-seat Bundestag, or Parliament, while Merkel's principal rival former Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's Social Democratic Party (SPD) and their allies got 222 seats. It is necessary to obtain 308 seats to form a government.

This near dead-heat election forced the two major parties to negotiate a power sharing agreement to form what is known as "grand coalition". Merkel, after three weeks of intense negotiations, managed to get the support of the Social Democrats, but the latter did get their pound of flesh in

the bargain. Chancellor Schroeder agreed to step down after seven years at the helm of the government; in return, Merkel had to agree to give an equal number of cabinet posts to Social Democrats, which included the prestigious posts of Foreign Minister and Finance Minister. Merkel and her allies kept defence, interior, education, agriculture, and economy portfolios.

Last Monday Chancellor-designate Merkel named a set of conservative ministers to her cabinet. They include some former ministers of Helmut

Staff, a cabinet-level post, has been given to Thomas de Maiziere, at present the interior minister of the Saxony province. He is a cousin of former East Germany's first and only democratically elected leader Lothar de Maiziere. Merkel was Lothar's spokesperson in 1990.

On the other hand, Schroeder's social Democrats last week named their choices for eight ministers in the new government. They include Schroeder's Chief of Staff Frank Walter Steinmeier as Foreign Minister, and Peer Steinbrueck, a business-friendly

consensus course to run the country.

Merkel's "mission impossible" task is to evolve the consensus course. She expressed optimism that it would be possible to reach agreement on key foreign policy issues especially on the question of improving relations with Washington, which had been strained due to Schroeder's vocal opposition to the war in Iraq. Washington would have been happier if Merkel had been able to form government without the SPD's support. It remains to be seen how far the new Foreign Minister, who was Schroeder's Chief of Staff, would

line on coalition talks. They would like to maintain their high profile on foreign policy issues, while Merkel's CDU would like to go for significant revision of those policies.

However, the bigger challenge lies in the areas of economy. The election campaign was fought by both sides against the backdrop of persistent unemployment and sluggish economic growth. It was undoubtedly the bitterest campaign in post-war Germany. The main factor that caused Schroeder's defeat is the current 11.2 percent unemployment rate. This

breaks. Both sides also agreed to maintain the existing system whereby labour and employers negotiate nation-wide labour costs but they are agreeable to loosen the rules. Merkel's proposal was to give more leeway to employers and labour to opt out of those deals.

Incidentally, in order to deliver her campaign pledges, Merkel has to compete not only against her ideological rivals in the SPD but also against her natural allies. The CSU chief and incoming Economy Minister Edmund Stoiber's views on economic issues lean away from Merkel's free market pledges. Merkel has to handle him carefully as he is a political rival and an aspirant for her job.

As per existing arrangements, all coalition talks, composition of the cabinet, policies of the new government should be completed by November 12 before Merkel could be formally endorsed as the Chancellor. This is a tough starting point for her.

The German voters have clearly indicated that instead of going for quick fix, both the parties should carefully work out economic reform proposals. The German economy, Europe's largest, plugged with high unemployment, huge budget deficit and growing oil prices, is now estimated to grow only at about 1.2 percent. The tasks ahead for Merkel are formidable. Can she inspire a team spirit in her cabinet composed of ministers from opposing parties and camps to face the challenges collectively? Germany is one of Bangladesh's top leading trade partners and a major donor. These important developments, obviously, will have an impact on our economy.

Syed Muazem Ali is a former Foreign Secretary

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Kohl's government, as well as some new-comers. She brought in Kohl's former Interior Minister Wolfgang Schaueble in charge of the Ministry again. It may be recalled that Schaueble had taken over the chairmanship of the CDU after Kohl's 1998 election defeat, but was subsequently replaced by Merkel in 2000 amid controversy arising out of party financing scandal involving Kohl.

The Defence portfolio was given to Franz Josef Jung, a close associate of Merkel's rival within the party, Hesse state governor Roland Koch. A former State education Minister Annette Schavan, who had led the efforts of some German states to bar Muslim teachers to wear the headgear, has been put in charge of the Education Ministry. The post of Economy was given to Edmund Stoiber, the chief of their CSU.

The crucial post of Merkel's Chief of

former State Governor as Finance Minister. These nominations will be confirmed in formal talks between the two major parties, and after that Merkel would be formally proposed to Parliament for endorsement as Chancellor. It is not clear at this stage whether Schroeder would play any role in the new government.

The billion-dollar question is, will this grand coalition work? Traditionally, the two big parties, CDU and SPD, form stable governments in coalition with smaller parties. The previous grand coalition between these two major parties was during 1966-69, well before the German reunification. It had worked at that time as the communist threat was there; but this is an entirely new ball game. The two parties fought the election on two different platforms; and it is difficult to envisage these parties making compromises for a

agree to the revision of SPD's policy in order to appease the Americans.

Turkey's membership of the European Union is another important foreign policy issue on which the two sides have clearly divergent views. Merkel had openly campaigned against Turkey's EU membership and she would like to pursue the option of "privileged partnership" for Turkey. On the other hand, in view of recent convening of EU membership talks with Turkey, Schroeder had told Ankara recently that "privileged partnership" was no longer an option. Merkel openly contradicted Schroeder's position, a signal of the deep strain between the two leaders on foreign policy issues.

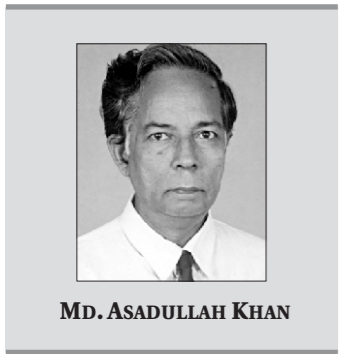
Such strains are likely to be repeated within the grand coalition government. SPD encouraged by better-than-expected results at the elections is expected to take a tough

high unemployment has already sapped the buying power, and had slowed down the German economy.

Social democrats have vowed to protect the German welfare system against the Christian Democrats' more "free-market" agenda. Economists are concerned that, given this sharp policy division, the grand coalition government would be slow to push reform to overhaul the country's ailing labour market for making the German economy more competitive.

Given this policy division, it is apparent that the new Government's economic package would bear little resemblance to Merkel's campaign pledges. There is a broad agreement between the two parties to simplify Germany's complex income tax system and to remove the loopholes, but there was no agreement on Merkel's bold proposal to give tax

Implementing PRSP Creation of a knowledge based society is a must



consensus based on perception parameters.

It is true when these sectors are addressed properly, the growth phenomenon is likely to spawn business and industry. But it is a utopian proposition, a road riddled with hurdles and uncertainties. Because Bangladesh is a country where certain ad-hocism has defined the collective mentality of a people accustomed to letting events shape their destiny. They have readily accepted and adapted to change but have shown a curious reluctance to initiate it. Instinctively the country has preferred tradition and habit to radicalism. It isn't conservatism. Intellectual haziness would be a better description. On one side the sleazy role of the politicians and highhandedness of the bureaucracy on the other have stifled the growth of the country.

Of course it wasn't all gloom and doom. Remarkably adept in the art of surviving, some of the people with ingenuity have taken on the task of beating the system. They rode over the system that was relegated to a series of intricate negotiations -- whether it's securing a child's admission to school or purchasing a railway ticket. We

The planners and policy making cell of the government must not consider PRSP as just a state philosophy, mostly confined to an exercise in futility. They must implement it to reduce poverty and in doing so they must empower the poor, provide them with security and create opportunities for them. Education brings both opportunities and empowerment. Undeniably true, empowerment is fundamental, because without it the poor are unable to influence decisions that affect their lives.

have wasted valuable 33 years experimenting on system and methodology either in education sector or development dynamics. Whether it is at the top tier of the administration or at the lower level of bureaucracy, successive governments have been fond of instituting commissions, checks and counter checks allowing the problem to fester without looking at the solutions that lay near at hand. Egged on by global currents, the country has just blundered on.

Technology has changed, economic assumptions have shifted, expectations have soared and lifestyles have altered but our governments over the years have put their thoughts of the big changes on hold. Pleasant enough, the P.M. while holding a meeting with the secretaries of various ministries in the second week of this month asked the officials to transact business by e-governance but unfortunately our dilly-dallying about incorporating fibre optics in the information technology sector and sub-marine cable have thrown us back from the information super highway. Just compare our position with Thailand where the prime minister has declared to give one laptop computer to everyone of the two and half lakh Thai primary school children at a cost of \$100.00 each at the beginning of 2006. Paradoxically, we cannot even think of giving at least one com-

puter to each school in the country.

Innately true, the government sometimes invites disaster and lurches from one catastrophe to another. The government is making a dangerous experiment of introducing a unified system of education without making any effort of bringing English medium, Bangla medium and Madrassah system in one stream. Alarming, this is being done without any brainstorming or without diagnosing the ills the prevalent system has generated. On the other hand the shortcomings in our present system of education have been lost sight of. Nowhere in the world could we find such discriminatory, divergent and messy system running parallel at the early stages of schooling, one for the elite class and the other for the poor.

Surprisingly, English medium schools and Madrassahs have sprung up in the nook and corner of the country sidelining the traditional system of schools. Nevertheless in an age that rides over scientific and technological progress, emphasis on science education is a must to catch up with the world trend. If our education system either at the primary or secondary stage of schooling has

our system of education contributed to the festering ills and large scale dropouts.

There has been an alarming liquidation of old schools both at the primary and secondary stages that once produced a talented pool of students. These institutions with a rich legacy and tradition had catered education to hundreds of students born of poor parents who later adorned the different service sectors and other professional bodies. Because of resource crunch, lack of interest in education in general and poor management mired in dirty politics most of these schools and colleges are struggling for survival. Unfortunately these institutions do no longer have committed teachers and bright students on the roll.

In a bid to pin point the real malady in our education system, we have to focus our attention at the core issues: efficient teaching staff, flow of funds and proper management free of politicisation. The deterioration in school level teaching, infrastructural deficiencies like dilapidated buildings or absence of any building or classroom in most schools of rural Bangladesh are indications of the rot

denied equality of status in a social order that continues to be male dominated should be the focus of our attention. The question that ad nauseam strikes our mind is: can we leave behind us forever the horror of hunger and the darkness of illiteracy? Can we create a society free of discrimination of any form? Yes, we can. If, as a nation we can rekindle the hope, courage and enthusiasm that suffused the people and revive the determination that drove the entire nation 33 years ago.

After all, we have been blessed with a fertile land and natural resources, a major portion of which still remains hidden and unexploited. We can definitely achieve the millennium development goals if we could have a new positive mindset attuned to the realities and geared to the challenges of the new century. One really wonders why a vibrant, multi-party democracy that have matured over the past 33 years, cannot produce men and women of sturdier political morality.

While leaders are making great fuss about image boosting and economic emancipation and development even after the country has been branded as the most corrupt in Transparency International (TI)'s corruption perception index for the fifth consecutive year, no effort to halt this continuous slide is visible. Meanwhile the educational structure of the country is crumbling down. John Ruskin, the great social thinker believed that "education was not teaching the children the shapes of letters and the tricks of numbers and leaving them to turn their arithmetic to roguery and their literature to lust but giving them training which make them happiest in themselves." Because we have failed in orienting the students and giving them a sense of direction in the pursuit of learning and character development, the nation now finds itself mired in crisis of overwhelming proportions.

The planners and policy making cell of the government must not consider PRSP as just a state philosophy, mostly confined to an exercise in futility. They must implement it to reduce poverty and in doing so they must empower the poor, provide them with security and create opportunities for them. Education brings both opportunities and empowerment. Undeniably true, empowerment is fundamental, because without it the poor are unable to influence decisions that affect their lives. At the same time, without security the poor can't use assets efficiently, nor can they be sure of holding on to them (assets) and enjoying the benefits of their productive use.

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The Lawrence Franklin affair High treason in Washington

INSIDE AMERICA
Despite the can of worms opened up in Iraq by a neo con strategy based on lies, distortions and deceptions, the cabal seemed determined to push on with their agenda for the Islamic world. The driving force behind the strategy is the protection of Israel at whatever cost to US interests. Meanwhile, in trying to deflect attention and camouflage the implications of the Franklin affair, the neo cons and the Israeli lobby are resorting to their usual tactics to deflect attention.

RON CHEPESIUK

PLENTY of interesting and headline grabbing news stories have been coming out of Washington DC in recent weeks. This has included stories on the elections and quagmire in Iraq, the de facto and incipient corruption scandals in the Bush administration and congress, the government bungling of the Katrina disaster recovery, US Supreme court nominees, to name just a few of the hot ones.

That's why one important story that shows how the Bush administration makes foreign policy and who is actually in control of it hasn't received the media attention it deserves. The story also raises the disturbing question: Are plans for regime change in Iran underway in the Bush administration?

Early this month, Lawrence A. Franklin, a Pentagon policy analyst with close ties to the neo-con cabal that's directing Bush's foreign policy pleaded guilty of passing on secret information to Israeli Embassy officials and to members of the powerful pro-Israel lobbying group, the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Franklin is scheduled to be sentenced next January and faces up to 25 years in jail, but he has agreed to help prosecutors with the expectation that his sentence will be reduced.

With several thousand well-connected members and a staff of close to 200, AIPAC is one of the US's most powerful lobbying groups and wields great influence on Capitol Hill. It has lobbied and raised billions of dollars in aid for Israel, while marshalling support to defeat legislative initiatives relating to Israel it does not like. Some of the most important officials in US government, including President Bush and House Speaker Tom Delay, have attended AIPAC's annual conference. AIPAC, moreover, has strong ties to the Christian Right, as well as to such prominent neo con figures as Douglas Feith, Richard Perle and Micheal Ledeen, who



Dr. Rubaiul Murshed

All health information to keep you up to date

Food: Facts not fictions

- It is better not to cut vegetables before cooking. If you want to cut them before cooking, cut them into big pieces. It is also favourable not to chop or slice thinly. In that way nutrient loss is more -- as it increases the surface area. Try to peel potatoes after cooking since it helps to preserve the nutrients. At least 10 percent Nutrients is lost if you peel vegetables before cooking.
- After washing your hands do not forget to dry them before eating. If hands are still wet, organisms present on wet hands may be more easily transferred to food lying on your plate. But take into account -- bacteria that causes food poisoning does not always look, smell or taste divergent.
- Cow milk should be stored in the coldest part of the refrigerator. And dry milk powder should be used within the stipulated period of six months from the date of manufacture.
- It is not true that food poisoning is always from what you ate last evening or night. It may take two days or more to develop the signs/symptoms of food poisoning. But it is true that it varies from man to man depending on immunity. For this reason small children with immature immune systems are at a greater risk of food poisoning than the general population. Well it could be also adults whose immune system is weak.
- In deep frying the food is cooked above 150 degree C -- where values of food substances are reduced to minimum. Over and above cooking oil or fat used for deep frying should not be repeatedly used since prolonged use of the fat causes polymerization of the fat which ultimately not only irritate gastrointestinal tract, but also suspected to be potential carcinogens.
- Cooked food should be refrigerated immediately. There is no need to cool at room temperature before refrigeration. Food poisoning bacteria often grow at temperatures between 5 and 60 degrees. This period is also known as the 'temperature danger zone'. Keeping food out of the temperature zone will reduce the risk of food poisoning.
- Lot of people think that re-heating food can make that secure to eat. In fact, it's not always true. There are some bacteria which can form poisons that are not eradicated by heating. Another point regarding food poisoning is that the formation of poisons may occur if the food has been allowed to cool slowly. Anyway, it is not a good idea to keep your foodstuff out of the fridge too long.
- Most ripe fruits other than bananas and apples can be stored in the refrigerator. It is better to avoid over ripe fruits as they are a source of infection. Unripe tomatoes should be stored at room temperature. And, once frozen vegetables are thawed, it is better not to be refrozen.
- Ice cream is not a useless food. It contains all the nutrients found in milk which includes calcium, vitamin A and protein. But unfortunately it is also high in fat. That's why it is not good for obese or overweight people or those who have high cholesterol level.