

CEC's observations before the press

His credibility has only dipped further

THE CEC has finally broken his long standing silence to the media to opine that the recent High Court directive, that the preparation of a fresh voter list be based on the existing voter list, is not binding upon him. This categorically dismissive statement coming from a sitting judge is indeed shocking.

Are we to understand that the CEC believes that the ruling is of no importance to him and is fit to be ignored at will. We must ask whether this is the respect that one expects the judiciary to be shown by one of its peers!

The CEC has taken his intransigence and stubbornness on this issue to absurd lengths. But he has not felt obliged to explain to the people the rationale behind his decision to go for a fresh voter list rather than prepare one based on the existent electoral roll.

The latest news from the EC is that the date for finishing enumeration has been pushed back by some three weeks to February 20, with the CEC virtually admitting that there is currently at least a 10 percent plus rate of exclusion of legitimate voters. The margin of error is too large even for him to ignore.

This shows the slipshod and confused way in which the whole process has been conducted. The fallout from all this mismanagement is plain to see. The entire process has been upset, the credibility of the CEC is in shreds, and the entire election preparations are now being called into question.

The credibility of the CEC has sunk so low that the public even had doubts as to the genuineness of his recent illness, that he had to go to extraordinary lengths to ally.

The CEC must be more sensitive to how his actions are being perceived by the general public and strive to ensure that the elections themselves are beyond reproach.

The CEC's credibility has become so compromised that today many have begun questioning whether he is any longer capable of presiding over a generally acceptable election. The CEC's primary concern now must be to act and to conduct the election preparations in such a manner as to regain the people's trust.

To this end, he clearly needs to end his diffidence to meet the press which could only add to the negative impression of a lack of transparency in the conduct of EC affairs by him. He must give the press the access it needs to inform the public about the progress of electoral preparations.

A year after Gyanendra takeover

Things have only soured in Nepal

THE political crisis in Nepal has deepened further with King Gyanendra stepping into his second year of assuming all powers of the state on a promise of restoring democracy which remains a far cry. The challenge before him, however, is the presence of Maoist rebels who have gained further ground due to the King's inability to unite the democratic forces. Rather, the political leaders are reported to have been facing repressive measures and are being driven towards some kind of understanding with the Maoists, not the King.

The King's hands are empty at the moment, as his attempt to organise municipal polls, in the face of resistance from the Maoists, has been viewed with suspicion by the political parties. They consider it as something of an eyewash aimed at legitimising the King's takeover. The press has also come down heavily on Gyanendra's one year rule, terming the King as having isolated himself internally and externally.

The Maoists have already greatly undermined the political system in Nepal through resorting to violence. And they scored political mileage too through declaring a unilateral ceasefire last September, which the King rejected out of hand. So, the possibility of a negotiated settlement of the crisis looks very remote in the prevailing circumstances.

Nepal has landed in a difficult political quagmire and only workable unity among the democratic forces could help the country extricate itself from it. The King who should have acted as a catalyst in this respect, has instead clamped down on the political parties, press and the Maoist with the result that he stands friendless.

As a friendly country in the neighbourhood of Nepal and a co-traveller in Saarc, we only wish that the government and the political parties in the beautiful Himalayan kingdom will make a common cause of steering clear of the deepening crisis they find themselves embroiled in at the moment.

Damned if you do and damned if you don't

The consequence of the US position is fraught. The US and the West must realise that it is the Palestinian Authority that they are dealing with, not just the party that has the majority in the parliament. It is a good thing that Hamas has been elected to represent the Palestinians. Their new responsibility will certainly cause them to reconsider their stated position vis-a-vis Israel. But an inflexible position and cutting off of aid may push Hamas into the lap of the radicals in the region who may compensate monetarily for what the EU and US aid cut may cause.



THIS is exactly what the Palestinians must be feeling after the barrage of threats of dire consequences from the US and the West following their recent elections. And all this for exercising their democratic rights in the most free and fair elections that one can ever hope to witness in that part of the world.

Perhaps, apart from the only other democratic state in the Middle East, Israel, it is the Palestinians under the PLA that have been run under the most democratic dispen-

sation, notwithstanding the many mistakes that Fatah is responsible for committing in the conduct of their affairs.

While the US seeks to democratise the Middle East and the rest of the world, it appears that its president has been overwhelmed by what he himself terms as the "power of democracy" that the Hamas victory has demonstrated.

And the position of the US and the West betrays the dichotomy, contradictions and, of course, the double standards, that predominates their policy in so far as it relates to the Middle East. And the Catch-22 situation that the Palestinians find themselves in, makes the position of the West highly pronounced.

Imagine how the majority of the Americans would have felt had the world laid similar caveat on future relationship with the US for voting George Bush to the White House.

The voice of the people is the voice of God, but hat nuance of political ideology no longer holds true,

particularly for those that are used to seeing things with severely jaundiced eyes.

The Palestinians have voted a party of their choice to lead them to their desired goal of a free Palestinian state but now run the risk of being ostracised for having chosen Hamas to lead them. Neither the election result nor the reaction of the US is surprising. The US would have liked a different outcome, and even though much was done to dissuade the Palestinians from voting for Hamas, the result has not been to the liking of the US or Israel. While much of the blame for Fatah's debacle in the election must be shouldered by the US and Israel, the US must not fail to go into the reasons why the people of Palestine chose a party whose pronouncements they do not necessarily agree with all the time.

The reason the two most important players in the region, US and Israel, have threatened to cut off aid and have decided to not to deal

with Hamas, nor even recognise the new government, is the Hamas position on Israel. Should Hamas not renounce its stated position on Israel, the Palestinians have no chance of surviving as a political entity. Not surprisingly, the EU has followed suit in aping the US position.

It is true that Hamas has been in the forefront of the struggle for an independent homeland for the Palestinians, a homeland they consider is under illegal occupation, having been usurped in the first place when the state of Israel was carved out of the Palestinian state. It is also true that it had resorted to terrorist acts against Israel in their struggle against illegal occupation and for the establishment of a Palestinian state. But that was a tactical expedient rather than a strategic philosophy of conduct of their anti-Israeli activity. And while comparisons of deaths are odious, one will need only to glance the statistics to see that the number of Palestinians killed by Israeli actions far outstrips those killed by acts of terror undertaken by Hamas. And one has to acknowledge the fact that Hamas has desisted from resorting to violence in the last one year.

While on the question of terrorism it is important to remind us of events of history that occurred in not too distant a past in this region. Some conveniently forget the fact that the state of Israel, that is so

vociferous against the PLO and Hamas for being terrorist outfits, itself emerged out of terrorist acts in the final phase of its creation. Let me validate my comments by quoting one scholar who says: "Terrorism in the Middle East has not been confined solely to Arabs. It is often not recognized that, in the years before the creation of the state of Israel, Jewish extremists who lived in the territory that was then called the Palestinian Mandate practiced terrorism disproportionately. Paradoxically, these activities are celebrated today by Israelis who claim that their terrorism was instrumental in eliminating British control and that, without terrorism, the United Nations would not have voted in 1947 to allow the creation of the state of Israel." (The Origins of Middle Eastern Terrorism, T.J. Nelson)

It appears that the term "terrorist" is applied selectively, only to those whose activities one does not approve of. To put the matter in perspective, not only Ariel Sharon, but Menachim Begin and Yitzhak Shamir were also active in establishing the Jewish state in the then British-mandated territory of Palestine. And at least two of them were active members of Irgun, that resorted to acts of terrorism and violence in the territory, like blowing up the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, an act that the British considered as "terrorism." These gentlemen and their partners in

violence went on to become leaders of Israel and came to be known as "freedom fighters" with whom the West suffered no qualms in dealing with subsequently. In fact, the Likud party, of which Begin was the leader once, initially was not reconciled to the idea of a free Palestinian state.

There is indeed a similarity in the way the Palestinians have organised to resist Israeli occupation with an organisation like Hamas predisposed towards violence, quite like the Zionist group that conducted more than two hundred acts of terrorism in Palestine. Isn't it an irony that Israel and its sponsors call these people "terrorists"?

The consequence of the US position is fraught. The US and the West must realise that it is the Palestinian Authority that they are dealing with, not just the party that has the majority in the parliament. It is a good thing that Hamas has been elected to represent the Palestinians. Their new responsibility will certainly cause them to reconsider their stated position vis-a-vis Israel.

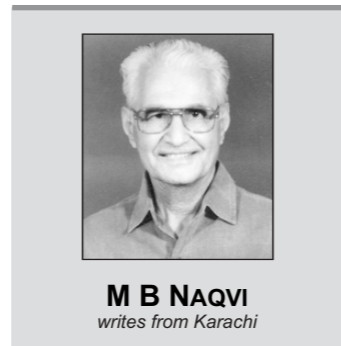
But an inflexible position and cutting off of aid may push Hamas into the lap of the radicals in the region who may compensate monetarily for what the EU and US aid cut may cause.

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Putting together a survival kit for Pakistan

PLAIN WORDS

The Army is unlikely to let go its stranglehold on the government and economy. This will go on infuriating all ethnic nationalists. At some stage, Army, a colossus, will clash mightily with variously combined nationalists. Army thinks it can put down this challenge. Nationalists rely on the maxim that a nation so deeply divided and afflicted with conflict invites foreign intervention. That is the context of mentioning 1971.



LOOK at what is happening in Sindh. The decibel of nationalist rhetoric is rising and sounds irrefragable; the loudest is the new entrant to nationalist ranks: Muttaheda Qaumi Movement. Authority, having penetrated and bought many of their leaders, treats them with benign neglect. Nationalists roar against the "agencies," the crucial part of uniformed bureaucracy and the latter smiles. But this may be hubris born of success the Army has had in keeping all major departments of public life subordinated all these years. But the Army shouldn't forget the very real and pervasive unrest among Sindhis who want to break the bonds that are keeping them tethered to an oppressive and uncaring system and a constitution that denies them their due. The dynamics of politics,

especially in conjunction with foreign policy's vicissitudes, can produce alarming situations.

Balochistan is aflame in more than merely metaphorical sense. Indeed there are several separate flames. Let's take the brightest first: whether or not the Balochistan Liberation Army exists, a struggle with rifles and rocket launchers is being waged against Pakistan Army and its subsidiary, the Frontier Constabulary. It is a serious affair. Authority's habitually maladroit reactions face a serious challenge from all Baloch (and Pushtoon) Nationalists for a radical change. Doubtless, these inchoate forces cannot defeat Pakistan Army with its modern weapons. But is that all to sustain complacency in the Pak Army in the face of flares ups in Kohlu, Kahan, Sui, and Dera Bugti? Can they see no worrying possibilities as a result of the vicissitudes of international politics?

The second Baloch force causing trouble and worry comprises Taliban and their friends, with or without al Qaeda cooperation. Taliban show two faces: They are making life difficult for American, NATO, and Afghan forces. Whether there is still some support and guidance from their old mentors inside Pak Army, as

the American media allege, they are one of several nemeses of Karzai regime. Their second face is one of the decimators of the Kafirs within: the Shias. Both faces of Taliban are familiar and equally dangerous. Pakistan military, the only policy makers in Pakistan, should organize war games on and about Balochistan with its mineral strategic value in mind. If it does, it may hear scenarios that will dent its sangfroid.

It is hard to compress the complexities of NWFP politics by one who sits so physically far from it. But Afghanistan abuts even more on NWFP (or rather Pakhtun-khawa) than on Balochistan. One emerging reality is the evolution of a mindset that results from the confluence of two notionally-related streams of thought: Taliban and al Qaeda. Current politics of Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal is only slightly a moderate version of the mindset that mainly rules Pakhtunkhwa and is also in an unavowed alliance with Pak Army. The more extremist force is fighting a slow intensity insurgency against Pak Army and Pakistan that is so much in the news and is making Americans exasperated enough to violate Pakistan's sovereignty by what is hot pursuit inside Pakistan.

Americans not only refuse to apologise, they seem to be claiming the right to what may be hot pursuit at will into Pakistan in days to come.

Eggheads in Pak Army should objectively assess the true state of Pakistan's relationship with the US. The Americans are 100 per cent serious about hunting down both Taliban and al Qaeda wherever they may be hiding. Pakistan in Americans eyes if Pakistanis remove their blinkers from their eyes working both sides of the street; official Pakistan is trying to hunt with the American hound and run with the Islamicist hare. This is an inherently unstable and dangerous state of affairs. Should there be properly conducted war games on NWFP, may be the same as for Balochistan, troubling scenarios would emerge.

Pakhtunkhwa is also home to secular Pushtoon nationalists. They were eclipsed by MMA in 2002 polls thanks to the magic comprising Musharraf regime's role in the creation of MMA and the "agencies." Most war gamers, one ventures to predict, would recommend another really free election without the political magic of 2002 polls being employed. The outlook will be different then.

No one has ever taken the trouble to investigate what ails the Northern Areas. Why can't the Shias and Sunnis live together as brothers, the way they have lived for centuries. Who is breaking peace? Is it not a fact that most people there want normal civic rights and self-government? Who opposes it and why? Who is deflecting attention? Why major opposition parties do not investigate the troubled politics of NAs. Indeed a non-official panel of independent jurists, columnists,

intellectuals and noted writers should be constituted by some NGO with funding from small, distant powers who are not part of the renewed Great Game in Central Asia. Parallel investigations by several panels will speedily bring out the sifted facts. That will also underline the reforms Pakistan needs.

Talking about Azad Kashmir is hard and also easy. It is straightforward: give to Azad Kashmir what Islamabad wants for Indian-controlled Kashmir: a measure of self-determination through a free election and investing more powers in the regional government. Factually, Islamabad is not sure of what it may demand, or agree to, vis-a-vis Indian-controlled Kashmir. However, remembering a few facts will be useful.

Original Pakistan demand was to hold a free plebiscite as a preliminary to its joining Pakistan. No clear commitment is available about what amount of autonomy will Islamabad give to Srinagar government. Will that government be like Azad Kashmir's or something like Quetta or Peshawar? Neither does one know what Pakistan has in mind for Jammu or Ladakh areas. It is clear that these will never form part of Pakistan. Since Pakistanis go on insisting on a change in Kashmir Valley's status, they should renounce claim over Jammu and Ladakh. Additionally, show in practice in Muzaffarabad what they actually intend for the Srinagar authorities. Today's over-centralised military regime is an argument against Kashmiris joining Pakistan where democracy is for ever subordinated to the Army.

As for Punjab, things seem to be very congenial for the Army.

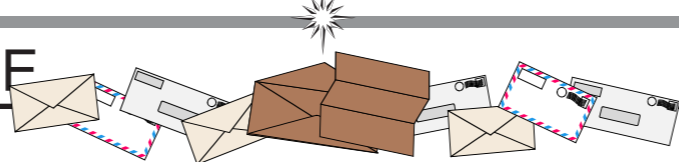
Today, Islamabad policies have 2007 election in view. Next year is significant for both national election and for President Pervez Musharraf's re-election. There is another decision that is due in October that year: whether Mr. Musharraf will demit the office of Chief of Army Staff or will he soldier on in uniform. KBD was a bait to Punjabi voters. That has made Musharraf the cynosure of Punjabi eyes, or so it seems. Once elections are over, all dams will take their place on the plate of Mr. Shaukat Aziz. "Agencies" appear to be sanguine about Punjab voting as Musharraf desires for Q League.

Pakistan political life is splintered along provincial lines. The fact that should occupy all minds is how have we reached the present pass. Doubtless Pak Army's rise to become a politically decisive factor goes back to 1950s. It has subjugated all departments of public life ever since, except for a brief interlude (1971-1977) due to special circumstances of 1971. Let's think of what can happen as a result of this permanent Army-controlled policy-making.

The Army is unlikely to let go its stranglehold on the government and economy. This will go on infuriating all ethnic nationalists. At some stage, Army, a colossus, will clash mightily with variously combined nationalists. Army thinks it can put down this challenge. Nationalists rely on the maxim that a nation so deeply divided and afflicted with conflict invites foreign intervention. That is the context of mentioning 1971.

MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Onslaughts on Ahmadiyya community

I thank Mr. Shamsheer Chowdhury for his well written opinion regarding the onslaughts on Ahmadiyya community in the past few years. What is annoying is that, the story of persecution has not ended yet. There was another ultimatum by the Khatme Nabuwat people to attack an Ahmadiyya mosque in Dhanikhola Village in Trishal, Mymensingh. Hope the authorities take note of it in advance.

Imran Dhanmandi, Dhaka

Fake voters!

A BNP leader in an interview with a newspaper disclosed that NDI, an organisation led by Jimmy Carter, found 64 lakh fake voters on the voter list. These "voters" were deliberately included in the list as part of a ploy to win the election. "What is going to happen to these fake voters if a new voter list is not prepared?" he asked. We are surprised with this discovery when the whole nation is observing the voter list drama staged by the CEC. As per his advice, the government has

recently employed two more election commissioners to increase his strength in the Commission in order to fulfill his so called dream of preparing a fresh voter list and hold a fair election. Already, we have seen how the preparation of voter list is going on, with enumerators mostly cadres and leaders of the four-party government.

People want to see a fair voter list as well as a free and fair election. The CEC should act for the people, and not for a party.

Mallik Akram Hossain
The University of Hong Kong
Hong Kong

BTRC steps

One gentleman wrote in his letter in a Bengali daily..."The British could not take in over 200 years what the mobile phone companies have taken from our country in the last few years". The number of mobile phone subscribers in our country is 6 to 8 million. This number is never correct since the number is determined by the number of SIMs sold and the fact is that many subscribers have more than one SIM and of more than one brand. So the mobile phone companies are earning thousands of crores

every year. And to do this their marketing department is finding new tricks to drive people crazy with their colourful adds and mesmerising promotions.

Very recently, this marketing affair has turned into a fierce competition among the mobile phone operators. The operators most probably have thought that their number of subscribers will not grow very fast in the near future, so they are trying to boost sale as much as possible. We welcome the BTRC steps and do wish to see strict control on the mobile phone operators.

One important point for the government—all the mobile operators have a huge overseas share which means the lion share of their income is going out of the country.

Md Bashar Farhad
Mirpur-11, Dhaka

IDB loan

The news item published in a Bangla daily on 25th January 2006 drew my attention. The report was on the interest rate of Islamic Development Bank (IDB). From our point of view, IDB's loan is not only low interest, its terms and conditions are trouble-free and straightforward.

Its hardest condition is to utilise the money without any corruption. IDB is eager to offer Bangladesh (BD) this sort of soft loan of more than Tk five thousand crore yearly. On 24/01/06, FBCCI in a seminar hosted by IDB in Dhaka Sheraton Hotel complained that two public sector banks have been assigned to distribute the IDB funds, since IDB has no branch in Bangladesh. These banks do not disclose the benefits and opportunities of IDB and discourage people showing interest about IDB. IDB wants to open its branch in BD but without a significant amount of loan it could not be done.

Mohd. Masud Rana
Islamic Development Bank,
Jeddah
Saudi Arabia

Fresh voter list

The row over the new voter list has made us perplexed, we do not understand why the Awami League is opposing the preparation of it. It seems that the AL will oppose everything the government does, stage agitation programmes, give call for hartal, and make life miserable for common people.

We think a fresh voter list is

essential because in the last five years the situation has changed, many people have become eligible to cast votes, many had died, quite a number of people have left the country and settled elsewhere and there are many who have returned. A great number of citizens have also moved to different cities so if a new voter list is not prepared, it would be difficult for them to cast votes.

Therefore, we think the opposition political parties should consider all these and refrain from making an issue of the new voter list. People have become tired of their non-co-operation in every field, we hope they will understand it and act accordingly.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Road accidents

Road accidents are nowadays as common as political processions in the country. Every day eight to ten people die because of road accidents on the highways.

Reckless driving and inadequate policing on the highways are responsible for the accidents. Contractor turned drivers, mostly illiterate and holding fake driving licence, make the highways a living hell. They indulge in compe-

titon on the highways by dangerously overtaking each other. In addition to that, they stop whenever they want to take passengers. The absence of well-equipped and adequate number of highway police and the inefficiency of the existing small number of highway police also contribute to the ever-rising number of casualties in road accidents.

In spite of a large number of people dying and being maimed in accidents, the government seems to take little notice of it. The laws concerning punishment to irresponsible drivers are also inadequate. Civil society organisations like "Nirapad Sarak Chai" should put more pressure on the government to come up with meaningful steps to reduce the number of accidents.

Mohibul
Dhaka

Party before country

On February 1, you came up with a very interesting headline. It read, "Forget internal feuds, work for boat: Hasina". I would like to make a small suggestion here: Forget internal feuds and forget about the symbol of boat as well. Work for Bangladesh!

According to that article, Sheikh

Hasina has told her party men that they should vote for the symbol of boat even if an useless person gets the nomination! Interesting. Sheikh Hasina, it seems, doesn't feel the slightest bit of discomfort in displaying openly her greed for power. She puts the interest of her party before the interest of the country. No wonder the governments of Bangladesh never get anything done.

Azad Miah
Oldham, UK

Happiest nation in the world

My letter is a reflection in the wake of a recent report by London School of Economics that found Bangladesh as the happiest people on Earth. Although it is quite unimaginable to measure something intangible like "Happiness", however economists in LSE tried to do so by measuring a level of satisfaction related to ability of personal spending. I think the term "Happiness" has more comprehensive meaning than defined by the economists at LSE. I should rather call Bangladeshis are the most self-content people in the world. Although self-contentment is a major factor in bringing about

happiness in one's life, however that is not the only factor leading towards happiness. A self-content person may not be happy due to myriad of external socio-economic factors and some of them even may not be in his or her control. I have seen some of my deshi friends being quite elated over this notion of "the most happiest nation" thing. But I really don't comprehend how in a country- where peoples' civil liberties are frequently being hijacked, corruption is rampant in almost all strata of society and wealth is accumulated by a few (mostly by exploitation of poor and common mass)- people are really happy. Claiming oneself "happy" amid all these odds and disparities does not reflect anything but either ignorance or self-denial. This is indeed a wrong signal to the others if we be complacent with what we have and do not struggle to change our condition (for better). I don't want to portray myself as a pessimistic, rather I warn myself and my other fellow countrymen not to be too much complacent with this very paradoxical notion of "Happiest Nation in the World".

Zafar Hadi
California, USA