

Caught by surprise. Again.

For decades, the dictators who ruled (and rule) the Middle East destroyed all political opposition groups. They were particularly aggressive in co-opting or exterminating liberal, secular, forward-looking groups because those were seen as most threatening. They were often less harsh toward Muslim groups, partly because the Islamists were seen as less political. And, of course, you cannot ban the mosque in an Islamic country.

audiotape, and pamphlet. How many people could possibly support mullahs promising a return to theocracy in the late 20th century?

Thirty years later, we're still surprised, and still asking the same questions. How could the Palestinians vote for a party that wants to create an Islamic state? We might even ask the question in Iraq, where elections have yielded consistently for hard-line ethnic parties (and hard-line ethnic parties, in the case of the Kurds).

Let's stop for a moment and understand how this happened, so that at least we can stop being surprised. The story of the rise of Hamas mirrors the rise of almost all such Islamic political parties in the Middle East.

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aggressive in co-opting or exterminating liberal, secular, forward-looking groups because those were seen as most threatening. They were often less harsh toward Muslim groups, partly because the Islamists were seen as less political. And, of course, you cannot ban the mosque in an Islamic country.

Rulers like Anwar Sadat and Jordan's King Hussein often used Islamic groups to discredit the secular opposition. Decades of repression, incompetence, and stagnation ensured that citizens got increasingly unhappy with their regimes. And the only organized, untainted alternative was the Islamic movement.

Consider Hamas. It was founded as a sister group of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. Initially it was a "quietist" group, accepting Israel's occupation of the West Bank as a fact and simply

working to improve the conditions of Palestinians within it. Both Israel and Jordan tacitly supported the group during that period, because they saw it as a way of dividing the Palestinians. They also probably believed it could never come to power. But they worked tirelessly to destroy the PLO and its successor, Fatah, a secular, Soviet-styled revolutionary outfit. (Remember that in the 1970s, even the United States thought that conservative Islamic groups were allies against left-wing revolutionary ones, which is why we funded the mujahedin in Afghanistan.)

But the man who truly opened the space for Hamas was Yasir Arafat. Arafat created one of the most ill-disciplined, corrupt, and ineffective organizations ever to be taken seriously on the world stage. Despite the pull of loyalty in tough conditions, Palestinians were losing faith in Fatah through the 1990s. Hamas, meanwhile, became more political, radical, and organized. It provided health, education and other social-welfare services. And it stood up for its people.

For someone in Gaza, here is the contrast. Arafat was corrupt,

and could not deliver on a Palestinian state. Hamas is honest, effective and holds firm. As Palestinians watched Arafat dither and Abbas fail, they lost any faith that Fatah has a path -- by force or by negotiations -- to get them a state. And meanwhile, their daily life was getting worse and worse while their leaders drove around in Mercedes cars.

Much is now being written on how Hamas will have to moderate itself to rule. But the next few months, if not years, will be a very rocky ride. If we are to learn something from this experience, it should surely be that now is the time to start building and shoring up the secular groups, the middle-class organizations, the liberal-minded civil society of the Middle East.

Today these groups barely exist. They have struggled under laws designed to prevent them from forming, with no free press to voice their views, no business supporters to give them money and muscle.

"Right now we do not have a level playing field," says Bassem Adwadallah, a young Jordanian reformer. "For 30 years Islamic groups have been the only ones allowed in the political space. We



Hamas's exiled political chief Khaled Meshal surrounded by portraits of assassinated Palestinian militant leaders as well as late Palestinian Authority president Yasser Arafat addresses journalists in Damascus, January 28.

liberals are just starting. We need to stop bickering, be better organized, present a persuasive program. But we also need some help." President Bush has said that democracy promotion is a

"growth industry." If it is, then funding such groups and helping them deliver for their people is surely the best way to invest. Without that you'll have elections in the Middle East but no real

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Is CTG reform enough?

The CTG reform, while a precondition for holding a free and fair election under the present climate, is however, not sufficient. In this regard, the recent fiasco within the EC immediately comes to mind. It is now an open secret that the CEC alone is not behind all the fuss surrounding the EC about accepting the recent verdict of the HC. This is certainly an alarm bell for the 14-party alliance. The issue of "invisible" hand must be addressed sooner than later, if the nation wants to get rid of the presently existing election-unfriendly climate, once and for all.

DR MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

THIS time next year, if the general election is held as scheduled, the nation will see either a new government led by the AL or a re-elected one led by the BNP. The second largest opposition party, JP (Ershad), is unlikely to lead an alliance that is capable of winning the election in its own right. It, however, cannot be ruled out that the JP could play a major role in forming the next-elected government.

The expatriate Bangladeshis in the west with a taste of liberal democracy have been in the illusion over the last fifteen years that their beloved homeland will soon embrace true democracy. What has happened in the last four years to this end is well known. The liberal democracy dream has been dashed.

It is now clear that Bangladesh has to live with a "sort of democracy" under the rules of civil politicians like a "sort of democracy" currently enjoy by our Muslim brothers and sisters in Pakistan under General Pervez Musharraf.

What the nation experienced in the last four years under an elected regime is normally witnessed with a military-led democracy as introduced by General HM Ershad in the 1980s. Even in some respects the military-led democracy under HM Ershad was far less heavy-handed towards opposition than the current civilian-led democracy. With the space allowed here, it is not possible to engage in assessing credibly the democracy's degeneration. We, therefore, rely on a pick and choose method for arguing our case.

Let us consider first some incidents in the parliament and in its surroundings which give rise to a permanent culture of House boycott. One would remember that during the immediate past regime (1996-2001), on one occasion, the BNP opposition MPs led by Saifur Rahman and B Chowdhury ransacked the House and came out of the session throwing files and microphones towards the Speaker's podium.

Since that incident, the BNP was under the impression that there was no point in attending the

House under the AL government and was abstaining to such time until their seats had been under threat due to constitutional bindings. It is now in the record that the then Opposition Leader (Khaleda Zia) attended parliament for only 29 days over 1996-2001. Eventually, when her membership was about to relinquish due to a constitutional binding, she gave in and made a token attendance to keep her membership alive immediately before the general election 2001.

During the BNP-Jamaat regime (2001-present), the table has turned and it is now AL's time to reciprocate. Recently, a report suggests that the Opposition Leader will have to relinquish her membership if she does not attend the current session due, once again, to constitutional binding. What move the Opposition Leader takes this time still remains to be seen. It is, however, noticeable in the case of AL members that at least they maintained a decent manner when walking out of the parliament and no drama of file and microphone throwing has occurred.

Next, let us look at what has been happening outside the House, particularly, on the street. Once again, one can draw a parallel between the regimes under Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda-Nizami, but with a mind-boggling difference in recent times. Over 1996-2001, the streets of Dhaka were partly captured by the AL cadres and pro-government police. The opposition BNP had slightest opportunity to come out and control the main streets of Dhaka. Nevertheless, there was an incident that occurred in the compound of the High Court building which cannot be ignored due to historical reasons, although it may be seen as a minor incident.

The BNP high ranking lawyers and Barristers (Moudud Ahmed, Nazmul Huda, and others) intruded into the vicinity of the office of the former Chief Justice (CJ) on one fine morning. Taking the law into their own hands, I hope the readers will remember, they smashed the office doors and windows of the sitting CJ and shouted abuse against him.

Ironically, this judge subsequently played the role of Head of the CTG in the 2001 election.

The government of the day (AL), for some unknown reasons, failed to protect the sanctity of the highest court of the land. But, at the same time, the then government was seen taking severe steps against the street agitators that left the AL in disrepute in the eyes of the general public.

During the Khaleda-Nizami regime, however, things have gone from bad to worse. The streets already have been captured by the BNP cadres, and the pro-government police action on the street agitators surpassed all the past records.

Moreover, the grenade attack on the rally of the opposition AL on August 21, 2004 with an attempt on the lives of the opposition leader and her senior colleagues has no parallel. Sheikh Hasina escaped the carnage with some injuries, but her long-term associate, Ivy Rahman, and 21 of her workers were killed and hundreds injured in the carnage.

The assassination of SAMS Kibria and Ahasanullah Master, both sitting Members of Parliament, further add to the list of atrocities committed against the opposition AL during the present regime. The Khaleda-Nizami regime has dimly failed to give protection to the sitting Opposition Leader and her senior colleagues over the past four years.

Under these circumstances, is there any peaceful way out? We do not think so because there is an inherent rivalry between AL and BNP. Until and unless this diminishes to a tolerant level there will be no respite. Why this unrepairable rivalry in politics? There are many reasons, most importantly political, institutional, economic, and personal. Let us highlight the political only reasons below.

First, one would remember that immediately after the demise of the regime of President Ershad in 1990, on the issue of future democratic governance, the AL and the BNP were at loggerheads. The AL went for a parliamentary type of governance while the BNP wanted a presidential form. The AL won the day because there was a popu-

lar support for the parliamentary governance. The AL's win over BNP was short lived since the BNP with the support of Jamaat formed the government in 1991. After assuming power, the first government of Khaleda Zia, right from the beginning, was indifferent about the Westminster style of governance. Instead, her first regime was regarded as a de facto presidential form. Her style as Leader of the House has not changed to a large extent even now.

Second, we all know that the 1991 election was held under a CTG headed by Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed. Subsequently, the AL successfully generated a popular movement against the BNP government to keep the caretaker system running for all subsequent general elections (due to BNP indifference to the irregularities at Magura and Manikgonj by-elections?). The BNP was against this idea initially, but due, once again, to popular demand, gave in and amended the constitution along the lines of a CTG system, introduced in 1991.

What does this mean? Over the last fifteen years, the BNP always sided against the popular reforms concerning election issues and certainly acted like a military-led regime. In contrast, the AL always fought for popular causes and tried to establish people's choice through reform. In other words, it may not be unwise to conclude that the BNP is a party of maintaining status quo, while the AL committed to changes for better outcome in politics and to create a level playing field. Why?

Presently, under the 14-party alliance, the AL, once again, is fighting for reforming the existing CTG system due to the reasons Khaleda-Nizami government created (recent controversy about the next chief of the CTG). If the incumbent is so confident about their good work, the question is, why then create such a controversy by knowing clearly that the opposition will pick this up as a pretext? As expected, the BNP, by taking the opposite stand, remains firm against reforming the CTG. At the end of the day, the 14-party alliance with popular support will make the BNP, once again, give in.

However, the question remains, like in the past, is there any guarantee of holding a free and fair election in 2007 under a reformed CTG and EC? What about the roles of Rab, Army, and other law enforcement agencies? Is it possible to keep these institutions neutral? The time has come for the 14-party alliance to bite the ultimate bullet and place the right question at the right time: how to keep the Army and Rab out of the picture on the day of election? One must not forget that the ordinary people of both urban and rural Bangladesh still respect but fear the armed forces personnel fitted with guns on their shoulder. Any sign of the forces with full combat gear near the voting centres certainly deters general voters from exercising their franchising right. This creates chaotic environment inside the polling booth and the unscrupulous cadres of politicians take all the advantages for committing irregularities, irrespective of party affiliation.

In conclusion, the 14-party alliance, once again, has a popular demand in hand and it is likely that the demand will be met immediately before the next election due to people's power. However, who cares about the CTG reform? The election engineering in the past reversed the voting outcome not only through the CTG's actions or inactions, but also through some "invisible" hands.

For example, in 2001, an extraordinary number of the AL candidates lost their seats with a margin of mere 2,000 or less votes. The AL's suspicions on this incident cannot be ruled out outright. While the 14-party alliance is preparing for a fight against election engineering in the future, it would not be easy to achieve a satisfactory outcome with an "invisible" hand at work, even under a reformed CTG.

The CTG reform, while a precondition for holding a free and fair election under the present climate, is however, not sufficient. In this regard, the recent fiasco within the EC immediately comes to mind. It is now an open secret that the CEC alone is not behind all the fuss surrounding the EC about accepting the recent verdict of the HC. This is certainly an alarm bell for the 14-party alliance. The issue of "invisible" hand must be addressed sooner than later, if the nation wants to get rid of the presently existing election-unfriendly climate, once and for all.

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Another Farakka?

NURUL HUDA

Bangladesh has already made loud protests over the multi-million dollar Indian Tipaimukh Dam project in the river Borak. Dhaka has reasons for its concern over the project as it has been facing the adverse effects of the Farakka Barrage in a big way.

The question which is being raised in different forums here today, is whether the dam would become another irritation like the Farakka Barrage in bilateral relations between the two countries. There had been strains in relations between the two neighbours for long over the sharing of waters of the Ganges. India's unilateral withdrawal of the Ganges waters, ignoring the right of the lower riparian Bangladesh, was even raised in the UN.

The cost of the Tipaimukh Dam project, which will be implemented in six phases, has been estimated at Indian Rupees 5,163 crore. The work of the project, which was started in 2003, is scheduled to be completed by the year 2011 and the North East Electric Power Corporation (NEEPC) has been assigned the task of its implementation.

The implementation of the project would cause drastic decline in the water flow of the river Meghna and its tributaries resulting in adverse effects on agriculture and its sub sectors in 12 districts in Bangladesh. The rivers Surma and Kushiara are likely to suffer most, which would lead to desertification process of the whole of Sylhet region.

The project, when implemented, would also cause adverse effects in some parts of India including Assam, Manipur, and Mizoram states. The Farakka Barrage which was implemented for improving navigability of the Kolkata port, instead of improving the situation has made it worse.

India has so far erected 35 dams and barrages after the construction of the Farakka Barrage on the river Ganges along Bangladesh borders without any discussion with Dhaka with which it shares 54 common rivers.

Bangladesh, which is crisscrossed by rivers, had nearly 1,000 rivers before the Farakka Barrage. The number of rivers now has come down to 250. Two dozen rivers have disappeared from the map of the country while 17 others have become canal-like shallow following interventions on the common rivers. The waterways of Bangladesh, which were roughly 24,000 km, stand at 4,500 km following the construction of the Farakka on the Ganges.

If there is no discussion between Dhaka and New Delhi on issues like the Tipaimukh Dam, neighbourly relations between the two countries is sure to suffer. It is high time that both sides sat together, not only in a spirit of good neighbourliness, but also in Saarc spirit for a mutually acceptable solution to the issue.

Indian minister Priya Ranjan Das Munshi who attended the 36th Bangladesh-India Joint Rivers Commission (JRC) meeting in September last in Bangladesh, had assured Dhaka that his country would not take up any project, which could be harmful to Bangladesh. If required, the drawings

of the Tipaimukh Dam would be provided to Dhaka, was his another word of assurance.

Nothing is heard about the talks between the two sides over the dam since then.

Priya Ranjan Das Munshi has been replaced by Santosh Mohan Dev as India's Minister for Water Resources.

In recent months, there had been several exchange of visits at various levels between the two countries indicating signs of improvement in their ties. It is hoped that the trend would continue and issues including the Tipaimukh Dam would not be allowed to become another Farakka-like issue.

Former Indian External Affairs Minister Natwar Singh during his visit to Dhaka on August 6-8 said: "The government of India attaches the highest importance to relations with Bangladesh and we are committed to strengthening the relationship through dialogue on the basis of friendship, trust, and understanding."

The issues which cause irritation in relations between Bangladesh and India include the sharing of water, trade imbalance, border security, and erection of barbed wire fencing along the border, ignoring the Mujib-Indira land boundary agreement of 1974. Besides, there are allegations and counter-allegations over sheltering of terrorists in each other's territory.

The exchange of enclaves in adverse possession is another issue of irritation in relations between the two sides. India's "push in" issue also causes concern in Dhaka as there are occasional attempts to push in Bengali speaking Indian Muslims and Hindus to Bangladesh territory.

Some measures towards improvement of ties have, however, been initiated through introduction of some bus services between the two countries. Nothing is, however, heard about New Delhi's response to Dhaka's request for introducing Dhaka-Kathmandu bus service.

Dhaka made a proposal to New Delhi for introduction of direct Dhaka-Shiliguri, Dhaka Shillong, and Dhaka-Guwahati bus services at Foreign Secretary level meeting last June. Whether there is any progress to the request is not known.

What is important is looking at things with a positive frame of mind. In the light of apparent improvement in relations following the holding of the 13th Saarc Summit, it is hoped that both Dhaka and New Delhi would sit together in finding acceptable solution to the Tipaimukh Dam and also mega river linking projects. India, however, has to extend its hands of cooperation first, as some of the irritations in bilateral relations are its own creations.

The summit level meeting between the two sides is expected to take place soon as Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia is scheduled to undertake a visit to India also in her capacity as Saarc chairperson. The bilateral issues are expected to be touched at the bilateral meeting between the two heads of government, paving the way for further improvement of relations between Dhaka and New Delhi.

Nurul Huda is a Special Correspondent of BSS.

'Let's not be very shortsighted'

Musharraf on how to win the war on terror

President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan, a crucial US ally, has a message for President George W. Bush: military action alone is not enough to win the war against Islamic extremism, he told Newsweek's Lally Weymouth. Speaking in the wake of recent U.S. bombing attacks in the north of his country against alleged Qaeda targets, the general diminished the importance of capturing or killing Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, laying out a broader view of how to win the war on terror. (Excerpts)

LALLY WEYMOUTH

Lally Weymouth (LW): Last month the U.S. attacked Al Qaeda in the tribal areas of Pakistan. Was this attack coordinated with Pakistan?

Pervez Musharraf (PM): This was definitely not coordinated with us. We condemn it and have objected to it as an issue of sovereignty. [But] we do know there are foreigners and Al Qaeda in that [area]... Let's

not play into the hands of extremists (who say) that sovereignty is only violated when someone comes by air.

LW: If the U.S. has intelligence that a terror leader is hiding in a certain house there time for the U.S. and Pakistan to coordinate?

PM: Certainly our capability is not as much as the U.S., but that doesn't mean that we should allow U.S. forces to operate in Pakistan.

LW: Will Osama bin Laden be found one day?

PM: Possible, but very difficult.

LW: You recently opened a dialogue with Israel which was not popular with radical groups. Where is the relationship going and why is it good for Pakistan?

PM: We are for the creation of a Palestinian homeland, although we accept Israel's reality as a state. I feel we can contribute more strongly toward this cause if we are talking to Israel... And I think this pullout from Gaza was a major decision by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. We thought this needed to be encouraged.

LW: How do you see the new Indian government?

PM: The relations with India have never been as good as they are today. We have got no tension, and there is no firing on the Line of Control.

LW: You made a forward-looking proposal about self-governance for Kashmir.

PM: I give proposals, and they

don't give counterproposals.

LW: The Indians say they have not been more forthcoming because of cross-border violence in Bangalore and elsewhere in India by Pakistani-backed terror groups.

PM: This is always the farce they use not to move forward. These are independent groups acting without any guidance or support from anyone, following their own agendas. Let's demilitarize and give self-governance to the people of Kashmir. These [Indian soldiers] are there and kill so many civilians on the slightest of pretexts.

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