

PM's committee proposal

Need to move forward urgently

THE proposal made by the PM for both the ruling and opposition parties to form a committee to work towards consensus on the opposition's reform agenda, coming as it did on the last day of the session, and somewhat vague in its particulars, is nevertheless a very positive step forward that is to be commended.

We would have liked to see more details, especially a time frame, as time is now very much of the essence, but there is no denying that the PM has made a sagacious offer and that the ball is now very much in the opposition's court. We would hope that the opposition could take the PM at her word and see her proposal as a window of opportunity for the fruitful resolution of the issues that divide the two sides.

What the nation now needs to see from the opposition is full engagement with the PM's offer so as to show that they really do have a sense of urgency with regard to the resolution of the reform issue. Too much time has already passed and there is not long before the current parliament stands to be dissolved under the constitution.

Sheikh Hasina has spelled out on the opposition reform agenda. The PM in her offer did not rule any subject out, and we construe this to mean that free and open discussion on any issue the opposition has raised is on the table for discussion -- the electoral reform as well as caretaker government issues. The opposition should respond by naming its team for the committee as soon as possible so that we can see that they are sincere in their desire to resolve the differences and reach consensus.

We thank the PM for being so inclusionary and expansive in terms of not attempting to limit the agenda of the talks, and the fact that the ruling alliance has agreed to unfettered talks should be recognised as a big breakthrough.

However, like the opposition, the PM and her government must demonstrate a greater sense of urgency with respect to the matter to be discussed, as we did not detect this in her one sentence offer that came at the fag end of the session. We feel that as much as things have been advanced, that urgency is still the key.

To this end we urge the PM to also name her team for discussions without delay and to also put more flesh on her offer by articulating a time frame. The time for resolving the political impasse dividing the country is now.

Exemplary punishment

Take the process to its logical end

A speedy trial special tribunal in Jhenidah has sentenced to death 21 members of the JMB cadres for carrying out terrorist bombings all over the country on August 21 last. One other extremist is to meet the same fate on account of a bomb attack on a judge in consequence of a verdict delivered in a Sylhet special tribunal.

This brings to close a chapter of keenly awaited investigation and prosecution processes within a reasonable time-frame, an achievement in itself by past standards as most of the previous bombing cases are still hanging fire.

It goes down well that the accused were arrested and justice has been done in accordance with the law of the land. Terrorist bombing of the nature is different from other criminal acts committed by hardcore operatives. Unlike other criminal acts these perpetrators have the potential of threatening the very security and stability of the state, aside from earning bad name for the country. Hence it is only appropriate that extreme punishment be meted out to those found guilty of such a crime.

Those who had been taken into the dragnet are being punished. But what about the masterminds behind them who still remain at large? A question does figure in the public mind as to the final outcome of the on-going counter-offensive against the extremists. Energetic efforts must now be made to uproot the mentors of front elements. Any individual or organisation confirmed as 'potential' source or sources of such acts must be identified and brought speedily to justice. A process of continuous vigilance should also be in place to prevent any future recurrence of bombing incidents.

This matter of dealing with the perpetrators of bombings must be placed above all partisan political considerations. After all, country is above everything else.

Who is winning in Iraq?

Coming to the question of: "Is Iraq going down the civil-war path?" the answer seems to be obvious. I cannot believe that people are wondering still whether Iraq has the makings of a civil war! It is not only going down that violent path, the reality is that a civil war has been raging in Iraq for more than two years.



Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

LONG with this, the other question that is being asked is: "Is Iraq going down the civil-war path?" Both the questions have been compelled by the most recent destruction of one of the holiest Shia shrines in Iraq, which has, not surprisingly, thrown up a strong possibility of the full-blown form of the latter.

As for the first question, it is very difficult to say who is winning, but no one should be in any doubt as to who is losing in Iraq. It is Iraq and its people that are looking down the barrel of the gun in no uncertain way. This apprehension has been reinforced all the more after the very well planned destruction of the Al-Askari shrine in Samarra, a highly venerated Shia shrine, as all shrines are, in Iraq; and the aftermath of the incident has all the recipe of a full-blown civil war in Iraq, more of which later.

There are basically three parties in the Iraq crisis that one must consider: first it is the Iraqis, who are unfortunately fractured (one hopes temporarily) into Shia, Sunnis, Kurds and the rest; and then a major factor is the occupation forces, or more specifically the US. It is very difficult to see any of the parties benefit from such a

development as we are witnessing currently in Iraq. However, let us dissect the issue and see who could be behind the explosion and how does one benefit by the current situation.

Surely, the first finger of accusation naturally will be pointed at the minority Sunni community, who are also the major insurgent elements fighting the US and Western occupation of their country. And what could be the benefits to their cause that the Sunnis could expect from such an act of outrage? If it is to prevent the formation of a Shia dominated government in the center, then there are more serious dangers to the Sunnis themselves if a central government in Iraq fails to take off at all.

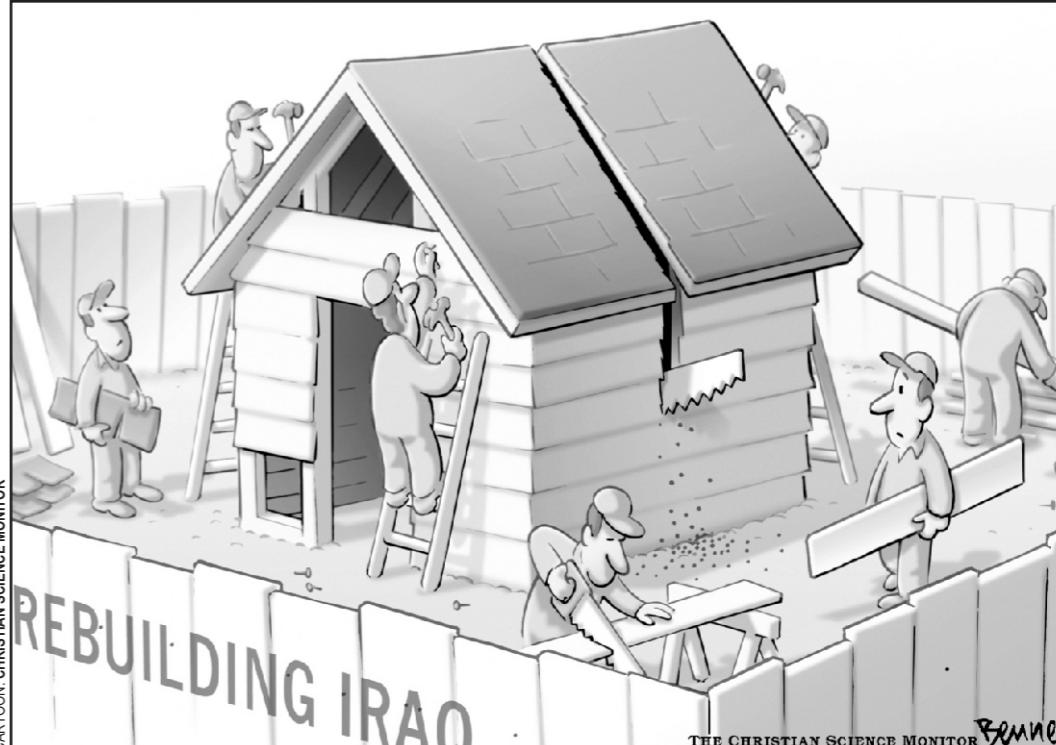
It cannot have missed the Sunni leadership that a central government in Iraq reinforced by the participation of all the sects in the running of the government in Baghdad has basically two positive consequences. That, it will, if other factors remain unchanged, ensure that Iraq remains one single political entity whatever may be the character of its future political make up. Two, it will, hopefully, see the end of the occupation of Iraq since the major rationale of the presence of US forces will cease to exist.

For the Sunnis their priority should be to see a modicum of political stability first and then the end of occupation rather than the reverse. If it is the end of the occupation that they want to ensure first, it will be foolhardy under then present scenario, to use insurgency as a means to drive out the Americans. Insurgency is but a phase of a revolutionary war that leads up to open hostility. And since it will not be a win-win situation for either the insurgents or the

US forces, there is likely to be a stalemate, and one is not sure whether the insurgents have any credible plans or any degree of strength to take on the US forces in the manner that the final phase of a classical revolutionary war entails, open hostility, and win.

And if it is the reverse they want, regrettably, we will only see the continuation of the vicious cycle, with the Americans finding the justification for further perpetuating their presence in Iraq, and the insurgents going about their destructive acts, that can hurt the Iraqis only. Thus it is very difficult to see any strategic advantage flowing from the destruction of religious shrines except that it will drive the wedge further in the prospects of reconciliation between the two major religious sects in Iraq. Who-ever benefits from the fallout, it will certainly not be the Sunnis.

It is also very difficult to see any advantage of a political strife, which results in the breakup of the country, accruing to the Kurds. It is true that the Kurds were fighting against Saddam for political redemption. And although they flaunted the demand of freedom, the Kurds are not that diffident not to realise the complexity of such a demand, since their nationality straddles several countries in the region whose governments have been as much rigid on the Kurds issue as the Iraqis, if not more. And the Kurds, the leading figure among them being the current Iraqi President, who had one time been a leader of a Kurd nationalist group fighting the Saddam regime, realise that the current political dispensations made to them by the Americans could not have been any better. It does not need a political scientist to predict that in the pres-



Rebuilding Iraq, Clay Bennett.

ent circumstances an independent Kurdish state is destined for unmitigated disaster.

Some analysts are given to believe that it is the US who stands to gain most out of the Shia-Sunni divide and also by the confrontation that they are engaged in against each other. They both being at each other's throats provides the US forces with the much needed respite, now that the US forces will not be the main target of the Sunni spite. However, I cannot see the benefit of engendering a full-scale civil war that will embroil the US even more, and is something that will eventually get out of control. Admittedly, a while, the Sunnis were on one side of the conflict; the Shias had been deliberately restrained from getting embroiled in it. And all this while, the Sunnis were successful in

the golden goose, but the benefit is in seeing a politically stable Iraq rather than the one that we are witnessing now. Thus, to impute that the US interest lies in continued violence and to therefore suggest its complicity in the latest shrine blast defies logic.

Coming to the question of: "Is Iraq going down the civil-war path?" the answer seems to be obvious. I cannot believe that people are wondering still whether Iraq has the makings of a civil war! It is not only going down that violent path, the reality is that a civil war has been raging in Iraq for more than two years. All this while, the Sunnis were on one side of the conflict; the Shias had been deliberately restrained from getting embroiled in it. And all this while, the Sunnis were successful in

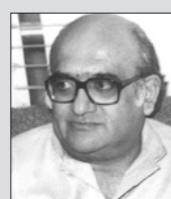
restraining their sects from taking up arms; and it was the US forces that were fighting the Sunnis for the Shias. It appears that that restraint may have all but dissipated.

Hardly ever have we seen a situation where all the concerned parties were facing the prospect of losing the war.

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The responsibilities of private education

My message is that you cannot segregate yourself from the society around you. There is a sense, I suspect, amongst our private universities, that they have managed to create self-contained enclaves within our society. In an environment of deteriorating governance there is a belief that by privatizing our consciousness and aspirations, a small class of Bangladeshi can aspire to practice a form of social apartheid which effectively disconnects them from the world around them. This, I would suggest, is a dangerous misconception of our social reality.



REHMAN SOBHAN

threat to the sustainability of a liberal democracy. We therefore have to seek solutions to the problems afflicting our educational system not just in our universities but in the entire system of governance and the practice of democracy. This crisis of governance afflicting our nation is everyone's crisis. Sooner or later, the new generation will have to confront this threat to the very assumptions around which Bangladesh was created.

My message to all those who will be going into the world to seek their fortunes and, to those who are expecting to do so in years to come, is to remind them that they cannot segregate themselves from the society around them. There is a sense, I suspect, amongst our private universities, that they have managed to create self-contained enclaves within our society, where they can exclusively educate their students to occupy selected niches in our private sector which may continue to prosper within the turmoil of the society around them. In an environment of deteriorating governance there is a belief that by privatizing our consciousness and

aspirations, a small class of Bangladeshi can aspire to practice a form of social apartheid which effectively disconnects them from the world around them.

This, I would suggest, is a dangerous misconception of our social reality. If the crisis of governance, which is the source of the cancer within our institutions of public education, continues to spread it will infect all segments of society. The viability of our private sector, the security of our elite residential enclaves, and all such areas of refuge will come under threat. After all, we live in a society where close to half our population live below the poverty line, more than half the students who sit for the SSC fail the examination, and our system of law enforcement has become so commoditized and politicized as to be virtually dysfunctional. Such ingredients in our societal melting pot provide a toxic brew from which no one can expect to enjoy permanent immunity.

In such a social milieu I would appeal to all to reignite their sense of public consciousness. All must remember that they are not just the

children of their parents, responsible only to their families, but are also citizens of Bangladesh, a nation which was conceived through the protracted political struggles of an earlier generation which culminated in its birth through a bloody war of liberation. The members of the educated elite must awaken to the responsibilities which go with the privilege of higher education. They do not have to become politicians in order to become politically conscious citizens in a democratic society. It is up to them to demand better governance or they will end up getting the governance they deserve if they abdicate their civic responsibility.

As responsible members of civil society, they must demand accountability from the state and public representatives. They must use their vote judiciously and ensure its integrity at all cost. Above all, they must ensure that some of the value added by their students acquired at university can be contributed to improving the lives of their fellow citizens who live below the poverty line.

What can a private university do to inculcate such a sense of civic consciousness into its students? I do not suggest that they politicize their campuses and educate their students in the skills of armed warfare. But what they can do is to encourage their students to be much more aware of the pressing socio-economic problems facing the country and the functioning of our institutions of democracy. Such a process of building civic and political awareness amongst their students

should be made an integral feature of private university curricula, as indeed is the practice in the world renowned private universities such as Harvard, Columbia or Yale.

For example, students in Columbia University in New York work with schools in neighbouring Harlem, volunteer to clean up the parks next door to their campus, work in hospitals and public housing projects and perform other such acts of public service. In the same way, the private universities should explore how its students can expand their education beyond the class room and be directly exposed to the social realities around them. This may include their involvement, as part of their course requirements, in some form of public service through association with some civil society or human rights organizations, through a process of mandatory internship. The universities may organize their own volunteer programs for their students. Such public service involvements could include:

- Working with election monitoring bodies and voter education programs during the forthcoming elections for the Jatiyo Sangshad.
- Working with organizations such as the Bangladesh Paribesh Andolan for protecting the environment.
- Working with Bisho Sahitya Kendro for promoting the reading habit across the country.
- Working with NGOs involved in non-formal education, adult literacy or health education programs.
- Working with neighbourhood groups to ensure that the garbage is properly collected and one's

para is kept pollution free.

• Working with neighbourhood groups for maintenance of law and order in one's para.

Many more such opportunities for public service can be identified which will enhance the sense of civic responsibility of the students of private universities. This will educate them to enter the working world as socially responsible citizens inculcated with a sense of mission. If democracy in Bangladesh is to be recaptured from the growing tyranny of money, mafias and terrorism, if our governance is to be made more accountable, then ordinary citizens and particularly those with higher education, will have to become more conscious of their rights and responsibilities and more engaged in the functioning of our democratic institutions. It is the responsibility of our universities, both public and private, to not just train a professional elite, but the citizens of tomorrow, imbued with a sense of justice and tolerance, which is essential to sustaining a democratic society.

Rehman Sobhan is Chairman, Centre for Policy Dialogue. This piece is part two of a two-part series based on the address he gave at East-West University's 2006 convocation.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE

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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.

Potential of IT

Microsoft announced plans to invest \$1.7b in India over four years. On his visit here this December, Mr Bill Gates said, "The only thing that limits us in India is the speed at which we can recruit."

The name Microsoft made headlines, but India for long has become a popular destination for American companies looking for cost efficiency in jobs that require IT related knowledge and skill.

Not that all these jobs require programmers or network engineers. Many customer service inquiries in America are routed to India to be answered by trained people. American accounting firms send images of invoices and receipts to Bangalore via internet where operators key in the data into accounting software. Medical transcriptionists type data hearing doctors' recorded counsel. Bangladesh, like India, stands a good chance to attract these jobs.

Indeed, the human resource limit

is more daunting here, because we lack basic skills in English and computer operating. But this is not a situation we cannot overcome. Government needs to take three immediate steps.

One, ensure good English education in public schools. Two, supply every primary and high school with computer. True, enough instructors are not available. But as Dr. Yunus said, computer is such a marvellous thing that mere access to it leads people to explore and learn by themselves.

Three, Bangladesh is getting connected to information superhighway this February. Now all corners need to be wired with optic fibre cable so that information do not get bottlenecked at the shores of Bay of Bengal.

Taken together, effect of these steps will be synergistic. For example, English teaching programmes can alleviate lack of skilled English teacher over internet. These steps

require money, are complex in implementation, and will give result only in the long haul, may be 10 years later. But the returns are sure and manifold.

Ashish Ahsan
Uttara, Dhaka

Regulation of medicine shops

There are too many shops selling medicines in all cities. Our medicines are cheaper, and we are exporting to more than 60 countries. It is time to regulate the selling of medicines by trained and certified salespersons, as is the standard practice all over the world (especially medicines without the doctor's prescription).

Some of the approved medical teaching institutions may start the short certificate courses, and the copy may be displayed in all the shops. The authorities, BMA, and the associated bodies are not showing any interest in awareness

campaigns or implementation. Now we have a large number of drug addicts all around. Why such leniency?

A Mawaz
Dhaka

Why so much ado over Iran's nuclear programme?

The world powers' attitude towards Iran's nuclear programme is unjust and unacceptable. Iran is repeatedly saying that its nuclear programme is only for peaceful purpose but the US is not listening to it and is prepared to take drastic steps.

The United States, United Kingdom, Israel, North Korea have nuclear facilities; India and Pakistan not excluded so why take on Iran? In the second world war atom bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the US but it is of no concern if US possess nuclear weapons! Is not it queer?

So, we think if Iran could not have it, other countries should also halt their nuclear programmes. Is not it funny that Israel could have nuclear facilities but not Iran, in fact being Muslim country?

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

Harassment of DV lottery winners

Interview of DV 2006 winners is in progress and will continue till September 2006. Questions are asked on subjects like international affairs, mathematics, geography and history, which are taught in Bangladesh. Since last year a number of people and agencies under the cover of free seminar cleverly collect certain basic facts of the DV winners like name, case no, date of birth, place of birth etc. False hopes are given that the 2nd letter will be made available (in exchange of big amount of money indeed) in due course. The seminar participants are told that no more

money will be required before issuing visa but tacitly the prospective candidates are compelled to sign contract that they will pay five or six lakhs after obtaining visa. It is also gathered that financially insolvent candidates are also trapped to sign documentary agreement that they will pay the money after getting visa or after reaching America and when they start earning. Besides the free seminar, addresses of DV winners are reported to be illegally collected from Zia International Airport post office sorting centre. Allegedly a group of corrupt employees secretly transfer the DV winners' mailing address. Maintenance of secrecy at an important department of the government is a sacred duty. By collecting the addresses by immoral means the cheats visit bright clients for sucking money.

These cheats often use affluent local leaders. It is also alleged that the local influential leaders are offered attractive amount of commission money for establishing their

reliability. However, there are a number of qualified lawyers in different towns including Dhaka for performing all sorts of works relating to preparation for interview form of the DV winners. The lawyers are accountable to Bangladesh Bar Council and the Ministry of Law for their work. But those 'trade license holder agents' have no accountability at all. Therefore it is easy for them to victimise the simple clients. So (1) The department concerned of the Ministry of Post & Telegraph must immediately take necessary steps to stop leak-out of addresses of the DV winners from Airport.