

Tethering in the twilight of war and peace



DIARA CHOUDHURY

Nepal today stands at a critical juncture of its history. April revolution has ended the days of absolute monarchy ushering the hope for a restructured Nepali state embracing the ideals of democracy, pluralism and secularism. The Nepalese have given their verdict in this regard. Now it is up to the ingenuity of Nepalese leadership to translate that dream into reality. However, it is not always easy to put the theory into practice. And, as such, Nepal, perhaps, since the momentous accomplishments on April 06, has entered into the most difficult phase of the struggle towards its cherished goal. In this endeavour, the task of accommodating Maoists' demand and thereby integrating them into mainstream politics seem to be the most daunting task facing Nepali leadership. The future is shrouded in uncertainty and rebels, who have emerged to be the most crucial factor in Nepal politics, seem to hold the key to whether the country would tread the path of war or peace. What, then, are the chances of their integration and what are the impediments?

A number of positive developments are noteworthy in this regard: a) a three-month ceasefire from both sides has given way to peace talks (this is the third attempt since the rebellion broke out in 1996); b) Maoists' willingness to accept the principle of multiparty democracy and accept the verdict of Nepalese voters on whether or not the nation would remain a constitutional monarchy; c) steps taken by the interim government in meeting key Maoists' demand like the curtailment of King's power, declaring Nepal as secular state, and holding elections to constituent assembly to draft a

new constitution; and lastly d) a historic meeting between the Maoists' supreme leader Prachendra and Prime Minister Koirala on June 16, which accepted Maoist demand to dissolve the present Parliament soon and form a new interim government that would include the rebels.

These are no doubt right steps in the right direction. But despite such apparent reconciliation between the Seven-Party Alliance (SPA) and the Maoists, two sides are far from reaching agreements on the key issues that would help bring this hardened revolutionary group on to the centre stage of Nepali politics. First, the issue of disarmament. Maoists refuse to surrender their arms before the elections unless the Nepalese army is disarmed, as the current army cannot be trusted not to interfere in the voting for a new constitution. However, they are willing to sequester their troops under international supervision as long as the military agrees to do the same. Second, Maoists insist that their troops be integrated into a new army. And lastly, they demand the restructuring of Nepali state into a federal state that offers greater rights to Nepal's ethnic minorities and erodes gender barriers.

From the list above it is easy to gauge that SPA would need to muster all its skills and ingenuity to reach a common ground. However, holding elections to CA is now most crucial. Once the CA is formed other issues like federalism etc. can be debated and incorporated. But how the elections to CA can be held without disarming is the biggest headache for Nepal. Elections without disarming the rebels in several countries with insurgency has had mixed results. Maoists

PANORAMA

The bottom line is that SPA cannot afford to falter in charting a course for a peaceful Nepal. All the parties concerned -- SPA, Maoists, civil society, and international community -- need to begin the process to end the insurgency bringing the Maoists into the mainstream politics. Any deviation from that course would plunge the country into another spade of violence -- something the country and, as a matter of fact, South Asia can ill afford.

want SPA to trust them but this is a commodity that is missing between the two.

A process needs to be evolved so that neither side feels threatened by potential tampering with the election results. In order to do so the SPA must start working to create a level playing field in which the elections to CA can be conducted smoothly. They must realise that Maoists' proposal to conditionally sequester their troops under UN supervision until elections and their eventual integration into a new national army is the only viable option to end the insurgency peacefully. None is possible without international oversight. Maoists' inclination towards UN role is something that needs to be considered seriously.

The situation is, no doubt, complex. That complexity is compounded by Nepal's proximity with its powerful neighbour India and its strategic interest in the area. For decades, especially since 1950s India's Nepal policy, as formulated by Nehru, has influenced Katmandu's internal politics. Now, as in the past, it would be very much affected by India's role. New Delhi's policy towards Nepal during April revolution has been confusing with New Delhi initially siding with the Palace but eventually casting its weight with the people's aspirations. People's aspirations in Nepal are to have a genuine democratic regime supported by all segments of the society including the Maoists. Surely the end of insurgency in Nepal paving way for a people's government cannot be against the interests of India. Presently, events indicate that New Delhi played commendable role in bridging the gap between SPA

and the Maoists. In the same vein it is expected that India's attitude, especially towards involvement of UN in the disarmament process, would be positive, and thereby, help Katmandu in treading its difficult path in bringing the rebels within the mainstream politics. Something that very much coincides with India's interest. Any destabilisation is not good for either country.

One may conclude by noting that the situation in Nepal, at present, is very fluid. True, peace has been restored but it is easily discerned that it is a fragile peace. The contenders of power and yesterday's adversaries are eyeing each other with unease and mistrust. The Maoists feel sidelined and swerve between rhetoric and conciliatory gestures whereas the SPA seem unsure and demonstrate extremely cautious approach. The bottom line is that SPA cannot afford to falter in charting a course for a peaceful Nepal. All the parties concerned -- SPA, Maoists, civil society, and international community -- need to begin the process to end the insurgency bringing the Maoists into the mainstream politics. Any deviation from that course would plunge the country into another spade of violence -- something the country and, as a matter of fact, South Asia can ill afford. The world, especially South Asia, watches as an uneasy Nepal sways in the twilight of war and peace. Hopefully, leadership of Nepal would live up to the expectations of its people and take steps to begin anew a journey for a peaceful and prosperous Nepal.

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A ludicrous election commission



ANM NURUL HAQUE

THE Election Commission (EC) headed by Justice MA Aziz (CEC) is heading towards another mess in the wake of their decision to revise the existing voter list without engaging its enumerators for door-to-door calls. The EC decided on June 12 to update the voter list of 2000 on the basis of the information of the controversial draft list, which was declared illegal by the Supreme Court (SC).

The EC has asked people to come to the election offices in their localities to include their names in the voter list. The acting secretary of EC informed the media that following the SC verdict, the EC would prepare a 'supplementary' voter list by including, excluding and revising the existing voter list of 2000 according to Article 10 of the Voter's Roll Ordinance-1982 and Article 20 of the Voters' List Rules-1982. The process will start from July 1 and be completed by July 31.

The electoral and legal experts slashed the EC's decision for using the information of the controversial draft voter list declared illegal by the SC in updating it, describing it as the contempt of court and illegal. In the face of harsh criticism, the EC cancelled its decision on June 14 to use the controversial draft voter list but stuck to the other decision of not to visit door-to-door for the task.

In fact, the CEC is playing ducks and drakes with preparation of voter list defying the order of highest judiciary. The SC on May 23 rejected the appeal of the EC filed against the HC directives to prepare voter list based on existing one. But the CEC twiddled with such a critical issue and waited for long 20 days on deciding his next course of action. Now he is heading to disgrace himself once again deciding to revise the existing voter list without going from door-to-door.

BY THE NUMBERS

It has already been proved beyond all doubts that no free and fair election is possible under such a hollow and ludicrous EC. The responsibility now lies upon the government to find suitable replacements of the CEC and two other commissioners talking to opposition leaders. Bangladesh, a country already plunged into enormous economic, militancy and political problems, is now likely to face the challenge of holding next parliamentary election, free and fair, with participation of all political parties. The nation does not like to face another volatile situation similar to the one it faced on February 15, 1996.

We really wonder what a magic the CEC possesses for revising existing voter list without sending the enumerators to visit door-to-door for excluding the names of dead or those otherwise becoming ineligible for voting right and also for including those who have become eligible to vote to the list. Asking the voters to come to the election offices to get themselves enrolled is a utopian idea. Section 21 of the Voters' Roll Ordinance 1982 that lays down the procedure for revision provides for door-to-door information collection.

When an undisputed voter list is the most important prerequisite for holding a fair election and the highly controversial EC has miserably failed to accomplish the task, Mr. Aziz virtually has made this constitutional body a hollow and ludicrous one. In fact he seems to be determined in making mess of every step of holding a credible election.

The circumstantial evidences suggest that the EC has taken such a short-cut method of revision of the existing voter list as it has no fund for undertaking the task of door-to-door calls by its enumerators. All the allocations for this purpose were reported to be spent on preparing the controversial voter list. Now the pertinent question arises, should the nation suffer for what was the arrogance on the part of CEC disregarding the HC directives? The EC must prepare an authentic voter list following the rules stipulated in the Voters' Roll Ordinance 1982, whatever may be the cost.

The crucial factor in conducting a credible election is the credibility of the CEC. But the CEC's credibility has already been undermined in a series of events, Justice M.A. Aziz, immediately after his taking over as the

CEC took a controversial initiative to hold a series of dialogues on the voter list with as many as 99 political parties and alliance without the main opposition Awami League. But the initiative of the CEC produced no result leaving serious disagreement between the EC and the political parties over the voter list.

His moral support to an outrageous partisan move appointing 150 JCD activists and relatives of the BNP leaders as Upazila Election Officers, has gone a step further to diminish his public confidence. The CEC is oath bound to be neutral for holding free and fair election and the EC is one such institution that has the onerous responsibility of conducting a credible election. But politicisation of the EC has created suspicion and misgiving in the public minds about its ability to hold free and fair national elections.

A free and fair election is what millions in Bangladesh are now craving for with the next general election only six months away as a general election has a greater significance in our parliamentary form of democracy. Unfortunately, the rigging of election in Bangladesh was so often in the recent past and is still pervasive. It is only the indomitable spirit of the people that has prevented the avalanche of rigged elections from engulfing the democracy.

But the controversial role of the CEC and the obvious absence of openness in the workings of the EC have raised some grave questions in the public mind about its sincerity. The CEC holding the constitutional responsibility, has also been failed in demonstrating enough guts and respect to democratic norms for holding a free and fair election.

The EC is a constitutional body and its sacred duty is the holding of free and fair election keeping it above political partisanship. The EC is supposed to be manned by neutral and non-pliable personalities. But the palpable partisan conduct of the election commissioners and CEC MA Aziz in particular, and their twiddling with voter list has made the EC to lose its credibility of holding the next general election free and fair.

The AL-led 14 party alliance has accused the CEC and two commissioners for partiality and demanded their resignation. The common people also desire that the CEC and two commissioners should resign and the EC be reconstituted in order to restore its lost credibility.

The odd and farcical activities of the CEC have already cost the country a price that cannot be measured only in terms of money. His latest move of revision of the existing voter list without engaging the enumerators to visit door-to-door should be resisted by all means, as it is inviting fresh legal disputes. It has already been proved beyond all doubts that no free and fair election is possible under such a hollow and ludicrous EC. The responsibility now lies upon the government to find suitable replacements of the CEC and two other commissioners talking to opposition leaders.

Bangladesh, a country already plunged into enormous economic, militancy and political problems, is now likely to face the challenge of holding next parliamentary election, free and fair, with participation of all political parties. The nation does not like to face another volatile situation similar to the one it faced on February 15, 1996.

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Private universities in rural Bangladesh

PROF LUTFOR RAHMAN

THE University of South Pacific (USP) serves the Pacific Islands region in and through its 12 member countries: Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribatis, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu, and maintains a strong regional presence through USP centres located in all its member countries. USP has the provision of distance education, face to face teaching and summer schools. USP has now 18,000 enrolled students and 11,000 of them are full-time students. It has an exciting future, being at the forefront of Information Technologies with its Satellite Communications Networks and an extensive computer network. The Vice-Chancellor of the USP is capable of providing an appropriate mix of visionary flair, personal leadership and management skills to realise the goals of USP as the region's leading tertiary institution. This message was published in an international journal of higher education.

According to the university grants commission's report, the total number of affiliated universities in Bangladesh is 74. Among them, 21 are public and 53 private universities. Another two dozen universities are on queue for affiliation. Bangladesh is, therefore, going to be a country of 100 universities.

On the other hand, there are countries without any university. From the University of South Pacific, it is learnt that the Vice-Chancellor of the Fiji-based university is controlling the university campuses located in 12 countries which do not have universities. Modern technological equipment have enabled him to run 12 universities smoothly while sitting in one place.

Recently an African University (Makerere University in Uganda) invited me to an international

Establishing a university in rural atmosphere is, of course, a tough, challenging and dignified job. Unlimited and unexpected problems of different shapes and sizes from different corners hit the project and project director who must have extreme tolerance capacity to tackle the situations. The problems can be minimised if they are anticipated. That's why, before embarking on any project, a preliminary survey or research is imperative. But for developing a region, the best way is to establish a university, because the most talented, skilled and knowledgeable persons are involved in a university. There are lots of examples how the universities have developed different regions of the world.

conference to share my experience of establishing an ICT-based private university in rural Bangladesh. Participation in the event gave me an opportunity to learn that there are countries which can learn from our experiences because problems in all developing countries are almost the same in respect of higher education. One of the African participants informed me that there are only 130 universities in the whole of Africa and very few of them are private universities.

About 80 per cent of our private universities are based in the capital city, Dhaka, where 6 per cent of the total population of the country live and are lucky enough to enjoy the benefit of private universities. The remaining 94 per cent people have little or no idea about private universities. Only seven private universities have so far been established in two divisional towns but their campuses are in Dhaka. Comilla University is based in a district town but its campus is in Dhaka too.

Bogra-based Pundra University of Science and Technology (PUST) is the first and only private university in the whole of North Bengal where 45 million people live. It is the only district-based university in Bangladesh. The name "Pundra" has been drawn from its cultural heritage Pundra Bardhan or Pundra Nagar. There are the remains of a Buddhist University

in the region, from 2000 years ago, and the area is known as Mahasthangar.

PUST started its initial activities in January 2001, achieved affiliation from the ministry of education in December 2002 and the vice-chancellor of the university was appointed on approval of the President of the People's Republic of Bangladesh and the Chancellor of the Universities in January 2003 for a term of 4 (four) years. The academic activities started in May 2003 in a village -- Thengamara -- with five ICT related subjects under two faculties. The main objective of the university is to allow the benefits of technology to reach the common people, particularly people of the northern region, through technology teaching and its applications.

In order to spread the benefit to the highest number of people at the minimum cost, the existing universities in the capital city can be relocated. They may be reshaped and redesigned to fulfil the purpose to the fullest extent. If the Dhaka-based universities are shifted to the district level towns, a greater number of people will be benefited. If the universities are properly organised and managed, they can earn foreign currencies as well as prestige for the country through enrolment of foreign students. Foreign currencies like dollar, pound, euro, yen etc can be earned in various ways, but I

think the most prestigious way is through offering knowledge-based higher education and research. If we want to modify our existing universities into world class ones, the best global talents should be involved in teaching and sharing their knowledge. As a result, world class citizens will emerge.

Geographically, Bangladesh is a small country with the highest population density. However, a number of them are highly qualified, skilled and experienced in various disciplines. Many of the talented people are working abroad including in African countries. They are valuable resources for the country. The nation should boast of them. Many countries don't have this type of human resources. Bangladesh possesses valuable natural resources including unexplored minerals. Research opportunities in the country are immense. Universities are the best platforms for research on local, regional, national and international problems that depend on social, cultural, scientific, technical or techno-scientific activities.

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For developing a region, the best way is to establish a university, because the most talented, skilled and knowledgeable persons are involved in a university. They can develop the area by sharing their knowledge with the local people. There are lots of examples how the universities have developed different regions of the world.

One of the missions of Pundra University is to bring the farmers to the university as research partners. The local farmers have lot to share with the university teachers and students. The farmers have traditional or local knowledge but the university people have modern knowledge. A blending of both will certainly be beneficial.

Pundra University of Science and Technology (PUST) can be the "Pathfinder or the Role Model" for others who would like to serve the country through establishing universities in rural areas. There is a lot to learn from the experience of PUST. The lessons would be of benefit not only to Bangladesh but to other developing countries as well.

Bangladesh can achieve one of the top positions in the global market through establishing an excellent environment for higher education in the country. For running world class universities, all sorts of commodities are available or can be made available in the country. We just need to create an environment by utilising our experiences gained from home, like Thengamara, and abroad. Bangladesh could thus be one of the best places for higher education and be well known to the global community as "country of universities."

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The OIC foreign ministers conference: A routine affair



ARSHAD-UZ ZAMAN

THE annual OIC Foreign Ministers Conference is currently being held in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. The OIC has developed a tradition of holding its annual Foreign Ministers Conference in a different capital of a member state and this year it is Baku. It is interesting to note that this is the first time that this annual event is taking place in a capital which until 1990 was a part of the former Soviet Union. Interestingly Russia, which recently joined the OIC as an observer, will be present.

This is a great turn around because the OIC since its birth in Rabat, capital of Morocco, had pretty frosty relations with the former Soviet Union, which since its break up has become once again the Russian Federation. That Russia should be part of the OIC, is evident from the fact that almost all the members of the former Soviet Union are Turkic Republics, and have close ethnic and religious ties with Turkey, an important member of the OIC. It may be noted in passing that whereas Russia has joined the OIC as observer; India, which with nearly 150 million Muslims is one of the largest Muslim populated states, has been unable to join the OIC even as observer. The reason simply is the tenacious objection of Pakistan, another important OIC member.

THE HORIZON THIS WEEK

It would be unwise to expect important results from the Baku Foreign Ministers Conference. Since they are meeting to, in a sense, prepare the Summit this winter, the meeting is unlikely to take any important decision. As usual there will be speeches galore on every topic under the sun and really minimum achievement to its credit. The OIC annual conferences have become routine affairs.

The 56 odd Foreign Ministers prepare, once in nearly four years, an OIC Summit. This winter the Summit is due to be held in Dakar, the capital of Senegal. Dakar has been a favourite destination of the OIC and given one of its illustrious leaders Amadou Karim Gaye as a Secretary General.

The OIC agenda is long in subjects but short in substance. The question of Palestine and the Middle East figure regularly. In the eighties when I was the Assistant Secretary General in charge of Political, Palestine and Jerusalem issues, it used to be the most important question. Although the Organisation is titled the Organisation of Islamic Conference it is the Arab issues, which used to dominate and passing reference usually made to the question of Southern Philippines, for example. Lot of hot air used to be the order of the day but there was precious little achieved. The situation does not appear to have changed much. If anything in the light of the events following 9/11, the world appears to be in turmoil and the Islamic world is bearing the brunt.

Much is made of Reforms of the Organisation. I have read that a panel of high profile personalities has been set up including

Mahathir Mohammad of Malaysia and Suleyman Demirel of Turkey. From my personal experience I can state that the OIC has been unable to set a credible goal for the member states. The main problem is that the OIC is composed of Asian, African and Arab groups and now enriched by the states of the former Soviet Union. Because of this fact the OIC has turned from a trilingual (Arabic, English and French), in to a quadrilingual group with the addition of Russian. The three groups, according to my experience, hardly ever pull together and are dominated by the Arab presence, because of its economic clout.

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