

CEC is at it again

His intellectual dishonesty is increasingly becoming clearer

THE CEC, by two of his latest comments on the voter list, has brought the credibility of both the Commission as well as his own further down, if that were at all possible. We find his remarks on the need to amend the relevant section of the Electoral Rules Ordinance to be able to go from door-to-door to update the voter list an act of unpardonable mischief, an act that has exposed his intellectual dishonesty.

The need to go door-to-door is a well defined procedure laid down in the rules to not only enroll the eligible voters, it also fulfills two other equally important adjuncts of the updating process -- deletion of the names of the deceased since the last updating and the deletion of the fake voters. The framers of the rules were well aware that this could not be done without going to each and every household in the country. And that is why it was incorporated in the rules. And to suggest that a new amendment was required is nothing but a travesty of the truth.

We also fail to understand his aversion to publishing the draft voter list. Either he is unaware of the provisions of the relevant rules of the said Ordinance or he is deliberately trying to throw the spanner in the whole election works. How would a voter ascertain whether his or her name is on the list in the first place and then verify further the correctness of the information related to him or her if the voter cannot view the draft? Publication of the draft voter list is an indispensable part of the updating process that consists of several steps and circumventing even one of them will cause the list to be incomplete and thus any election under that list will be an infraction of the process.

As we have said in this column in the past that the CEC has always recanted his position at great national cost but with always a caveat that has compounded the situation further. His latest utterances on the publication of the voter list and the revising of his earlier stance on the modality of updating it are an example of his mindset.

We cannot but help feel strongly that the gentleman is out to spoil the election. One wonders whose agenda he is carrying out.

IGP's words

We wish he hadn't uttered some of them

WE welcome the new Inspector General of Police Anwarul Iqbal on his assumption of office. Come as he does at a critical juncture of our national life, all his skill, integrity and experience are likely to be severely tested in his new assignment. While meeting with the officials of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP), he hit the nail on its head. He stressed the point of image crisis faced by the police and exhorted upon them the need for ensuring transparency and accountability in discharging their responsibilities.

We appreciate him for underscoring the imperative necessity for regaining the lost public trust and confidence in the police force by their deeds. We in the media promise him full support in his efforts.

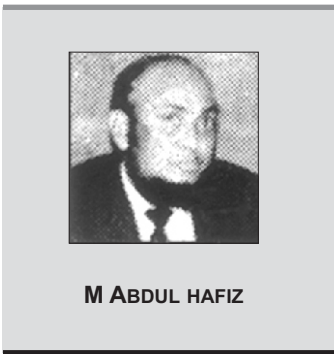
So far so good. It is, however, his forewarning to the effect that the police would go into instant action if any law enforcer came under assault during any political agitation that has startled us.

Thanks to BBC and CNN, we have witnessed how in the vicinity of WTO meetings the police handle the burgeoning crowds of protesters with great patience, skill and tact. Lately, in Thailand violent agitation against beleaguered Prime Minister Thaksin Sinawatra was contained without casualties. Our police force needs to be trained in modern day crowd control methods.

Now, if the police should move into instant action while facing up to an assault by any agitator how then do they differentiate themselves from a band of goons? Mind you, when the police chief utters those words it will have an instant bearing on police action which more often than not is provocative. The incipient danger in such remarks from the police top brass is that these may be construed as instructions lower down. The essential thing to realise here is that the police are armed while the agitators are not in that sense, the latter having brick or stone chips to hurl. So, if the police are retributive the casualties can be heavy.

In this context, such remarks by the IGP may give rise to misgivings in the public mind, so that these now need to be replaced by such words by the police chief as will calm members of his force. Police-people confrontation is to be avoided at any cost.

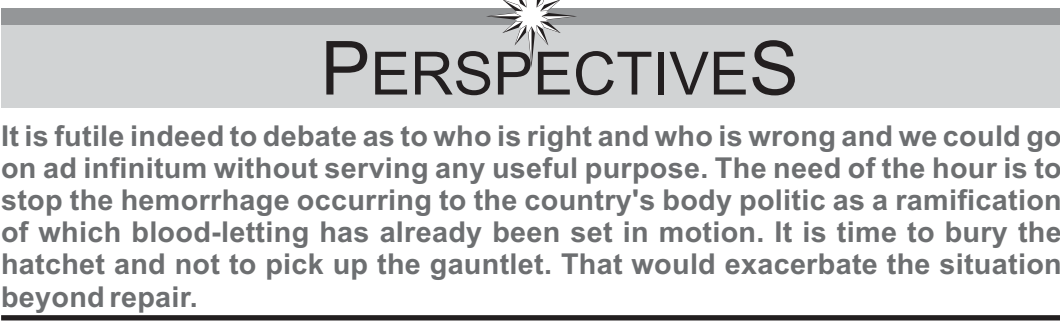
Time to bury the hatchet



M ABDUL HAFIZ

EVEN if the country's dominant political discourse is now focused on a possible dialogue over the opposition's reform proposals with regard to election commission and caretaker government, the street is increasingly heating up -- thanks to the obstinate stances on either side of the political divide. The political ambience has already turned foul with escalating conflict among the opposing political forces.

It has, in the meantime, taken its lethal toll with at least two dead, both of whom fell victim to violence during the opposition's countrywide siege on July 2. The way the contenders in the conflict have hardened their position and the way our political trend is



It is futile indeed to debate as to who is right and who is wrong and we could go on ad infinitum without serving any useful purpose. The need of the hour is to stop the hemorrhage occurring to the country's body politic as a ramification of which blood-letting has already been set in motion. It is time to bury the hatchet and not to pick up the gauntlet. That would exacerbate the situation beyond repair.

unraveling, the prevailing unrest will snowball into a major crisis.

Yet, there seems to be no visible attempt from any quarter to arrest the trend and bring back sanity to our political behaviour. Both the government and the AL-led 14 parties have been fighting their no-win war to vindicate their standpoint -- thus narrowing down in the process any middle ground that they could choose.

It is futile indeed to debate as to who is right and who is wrong and we could go on ad infinitum without serving any useful purpose. The need of the hour is to stop the hemorrhage occurring to the country's body politic as a ramification of which blood-letting has already been set in motion. It is time to bury the hatchet and not to pick up the gauntlet. That would exacerbate the situation beyond repair.

But unfortunately that's what the government is doing not only by giving a damn to whatever the AL-led 14 party demanded and also riding roughshod over the opposition activists whenever they took to the street to press their unfulfilled demands afresh. The opposition has been preemptively driven off the street thus provoking it to respond in the same coin. The police, led by BNP and Jaamat cadres, wreaked havoc with the peaceful precisionists who then reacted with the same fury. After all, all actions have their equal reactions -- as said in Newtonian theory. And the cycle goes on with police becoming increasingly shorn of any trace of civility and the public having no respect for the custodians of law and order.

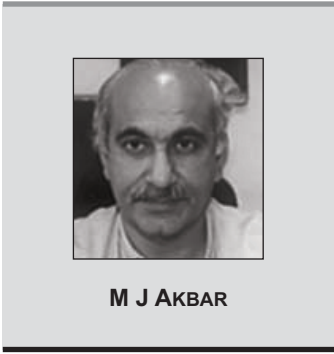
The government leaders have so far been full of assurances of

settling the issues through dialogue but miserably short on fulfilling those assurances. The government's actions do not carry any sign of its coming to term with the opposition's demands. As a result the crisis deepens.

But it's only the political dimension of the crisis. At the core of it lies the government's all-round failures and the resultant alienation of the people leading to 4-party alliance's fear of losing the election early next year. It's terrible loss of face with its failure to save hard-hit public from syndicated market manipulation resulting in unprecedented misery for them is a pointer. The prices of the essentials have spralled to an all-time high with few signs of relief any time soon.

Obviously only the change of this failed dispensation may rescue the people from its misrule

High-flying rumours



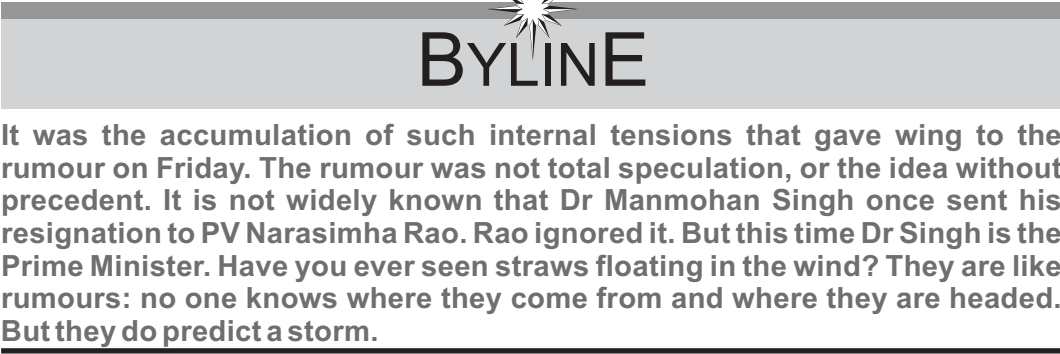
M J AKBAR

EVERY lie must be denied; otherwise it becomes an attachment to the truth. I am not equally sure that rumours deserve similar attention, because a denial tends to live in the same haze as the rumour. The smoke-and-fire axiom begins to operate: could there be smoke without fire? Prime Ministers must be particularly careful about smoke.

What is a rumour? It is much more than repetition of a lie, for a lie rarely travels very far. A rumour finds legs only because it has the possibility of being true. The success of a lie depends on the credibility of the perpetrator. A rumour succeeds because of its persuasive ability, because those who hear it are amenable, consciously or subconsciously. Why are they amenable? Because there is sufficient circumstantial evidence to give credence to the rumour.

Could there be denial without some, however fleeting, truth in it?

Spread a rumour that Manmohan Singh has taken money in the growing Navy scandal, and no one will believe it. There is no evidence that in a lifetime of public service Manmohan Singh has taken an



It was the accumulation of such internal tensions that gave wing to the rumour on Friday. The rumour was not total speculation, or the idea without precedent. It is not widely known that Dr Manmohan Singh once sent his resignation to PV Narasimha Rao. Rao ignored it. But this time Dr Singh is the Prime Minister. Have you ever seen straws floating in the wind? They are like rumours: no one knows where they come from and where they are headed. But they do predict a storm.

illegitimate rupee.

No one would have believed a rumour in July 2005 that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was about to resign. In July last year he was in full command of his Cabinet, and had the determination of a leader with an agenda, focused around what he believed would be a historic deal with the United States. The process began with an agreement signed by defence minister Pranab Mukherjee on June 28 last year, and gathered momentum during Dr Singh's visit to the White House later last year.

Is it irony, or merely poetic justice, that Dr Manmohan Singh's political credibility began to waver after President George Bush's pseudo-historical visit to India, and his announcement that Washington was ready to go ahead with the nuclear deal. Euphoria, particularly of the premature kind, tends to breed errors, even among the most balanced of men.

Dr Singh had a significant lapse of judgment when he dismissed opposition to the Bush visit as "communal." Suspicion about what was being cooked in the cavernous kitchens of Delhi and Washington was not a by-product of latent communalism.

In any event, to call Marxists, who led the demonstrations against Bush, communal is apolitical if not absurd. The government quickly stopped parroting this line, but even this small self-inflicted wound created an opportunity. For the government was up against something far more potent than communalism: nationalism.

Suspicion became a worry when the terms of engagement were revealed. Dr Homi Sethna, former chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission and a founding-father of India's nuclear program, read the details and said that what Dr Manmohan Singh was about to sign was worse than joining the NPT regime. No government in Delhi of any colour ever dared to compromise India's independent nuclear assets by joining the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime. We are now on the verge of surrendering our independence, and all we can hear is the sound of silence.

Dr A. Gopalakrishnan, former chairman of the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board, has outlined how precisely commitments made by Dr Singh to Parliament and the people have been blatantly undermined and notes that

if the deal goes through in its present form, it will "compromise the sovereignty of this country for decades to come." He has exposed the very enormous financial price that India will have to pay as well: between Rs 300,000 to Rs 400,000 crores in nuclear reactors that will be totally dependent for their existence on a yearly audit of our policies by the US Congress. Dr P.K. Iyengar, another former chairman of the AEC, has called the deal "giving up sovereignty." These men have spent their lives translating an Indian vision, crafted by Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, into reality. They do not have a political or personal agenda.

It is in the nature of coalition politics that the first people to exploit weakness or uncertainty at the centre are partners and allies: the Opposition, depressed and moribund, wakes up much later, if it wakes up at all. It is axiomatic that a politician will, at some point in his term of power, give priority to the politics of re-election over the demands of governance. This is accepted, and even acceptable towards the end of a term of power. But if there is the slightest doubt about how long a Prime Minister will

steeped in unparalled corruption. But a free and fair election alone can bring about that change. Therefore, the people have been increasingly swelling the ranks of the protesters both against the misrule and against election engineering which has been going on rather surreptitiously.

The arbitrary appointment of a partisan Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), trickily worked out steps to have a partyman as the head of the caretaker government, the politicisation of the administration, as well as mystery surrounding the office of the President have all reinforced public scepticism that there cannot be a free and fair election without certain reforms in election mechanism. The delusions are that with which the government has been trying to parry those reform proposals.

In the name of preparation for the next election, what the government has so far displayed is simply sleight of hand, and it is still continuing with that. An outlandish CEC whose electoral rolls were rejected earlier for the lack of probity and one who was almost universally condemned for his puerile conduct is still hale and hearty in his place, although

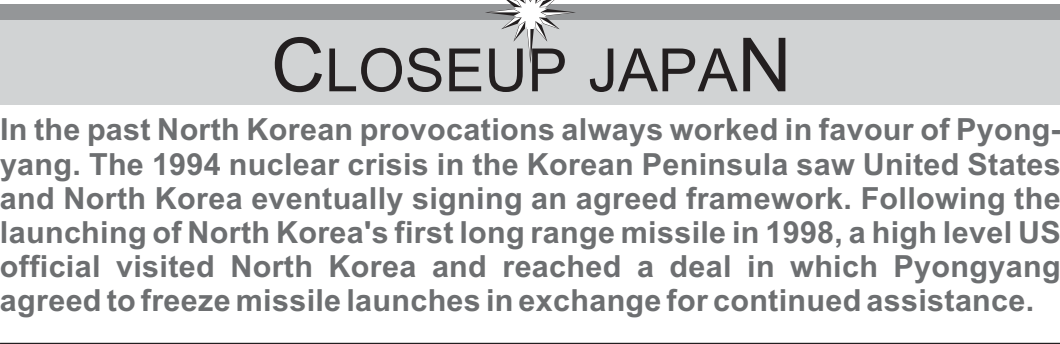
an EC headed by a man of integrity is sine qua non for a credible election. The government showed no interest in his removal, disregarding universal public demand.

Instead of positively responding to popular public demands, the government has naively taken a hardline which will intensify the prevailing unrest, having its effects on our wobbly economy, state of investment, as well trade and commerce. But the wielders of power need only an elixir of power to revitalise themselves. All governments, even in the past, behaved in the same manner when they were alienated from the people. They then started considering people their opponents and resorted to force to cow the agitating public into submission.

Tell-tale evidence abounds that the authority will have its last bit before it yields. It's both a war of nerve and wit. It remains to be seen whether the opposition which has not always played well can hold till then or peters out before its movement gains a decisive momentum.

Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BIIS.

Pyongyang's provocation



In the past North Korean provocations always worked in favour of Pyongyang. The 1994 nuclear crisis in the Korean Peninsula saw United States and North Korea eventually signing an agreed framework. Following the launching of North Korea's first long range missile in 1998, a high level US official visited North Korea and reached a deal in which Pyongyang agreed to freeze missile launches in exchange for continued assistance.

MONZURUL HUQ

THE words were in the air for quite sometime. As the media in Japan and some Western countries were talking; politicians were busy keeping a watchful eye, military strategists were picturing details of a worst-case scenario, while people everywhere were left in the midst of a guessing game, not knowing for sure who was right and who was wrong. And then as things seemed to be cooling down, all of a sudden came the bang -- one, two, three ... seven.

This is a very brief scenario and the background of what happened in the early hours of July 5 when North Korea test fired seven

missiles within a few hours time. Now, as what indeed was predicted for a long had happened in reality, both North Korea and her adversaries are seem to be on the ring, warming up for the eventual start of a real bout with the first blow of the whistle.

Northeast Asia, as a result, all of a sudden has turned into an extremely dangerous place, where talks of retaliation and providing opponents with a very good lesson of power so that they dare not try again what they had been up to right now are abound. So much so, that even politicians also started losing senses as their minds seemed to have been blocked by a single thought of revenge.

As parties concerned have decided to throw the dice with the hope of a good luck, the background scenario of what prompted Pyongyang to resort to an open defiance becoming more puzzling. Is it a mere showing of strength to Japan, the country with which Pyongyang is having the most adversarial of all its relationship? Or is it a kind of pressure on Washington to compel the United States to rethink the strategy of not getting involved with North Korea in any direct negotiation?

As far as Japan is concerned, the policymakers and politicians belonging to various political groups are united in their assessment that the aim of last week's

missile test fires was precisely Japan. Hence there is also a growing sense of uneasiness, both among the political circle as well as ordinary citizens about a real-case scenario when a missile might indeed land in and around Japan carrying deadly and destructive warheads. As a result, the hawkish tone of political leadership that can be heard these days all over the country seems to be what many in Japan were probably expecting.

Immediately after the Wednesday incident, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi called President George W. Bush to discuss various options that two countries now have before finalizing what joint action against the North Korean move they were to take. Koizumi asked the US president to garner support for a draft UN Security Council resolution that Japan later submitted. To show the North Koreans that the Japanese reactions are no longer destined to remain simply political rhetoric, the government has already decided to impose ban on the entry of a North Korean vessel to Japanese ports for six months. Observers see the embargo as

first of many measures that the Japanese side is poised to take to punish Pyongyang's provocative act.

The political spectrum in Japan too suddenly seems to be finding a common and united ground. Unlike in other times, country's political arena is holding a unified standing that the launching of missiles was an act of provocation that wouldn't bring anything good to the people of North Korea. Even the leaders of the Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party of Japan, long seen to be mild and softer towards North Korea, also voiced concern about Pyongyang's latest missile drama.

Such public mood obviously serves well for politicians long seen as hawkish and they are now not hesitant to take steps that might jeopardize further the already complicated situation of the region. The leading among them is Shinzo Abe, the Chief Cabinet Secretary and the front runner in the race for the replacement of Koizumi after he steps down in September. As expected, fuelled by the magical power of nationalism that received further

boost from North Korean missiles, Abe did not hesitate to cross the line of diplomatic decency as he told reporter openly and in a plain language that the missile launches "constitute a grave issue and no nation should be perceived, even by mistake, to harbour sympathy for North Korea."

Abe's message, no doubt, has been directed not to Pyongyang, but to countries that continue to maintain normal ties with North Korea, particularly China and Russia. Both Russia and China, on the other hand, are resisting any strong measure, including sanctions, to pursue North Korea to abandon its weapons program and are in favor of less punitive actions. As a result, gaining the much needed full cooperation of China and Russia for a Security Council resolution will not be easy at all and sentimental comments with the purpose of strengthening domestic support base can only complicate the situation further.

Observers are now convinced that the main purpose of North Korea's missile launching was not to provoke Japan or any other neighbouring countries, but to

send a clear message to Washington that the United States should not delay further to begin direct negotiation with Pyongyang. One particular fact that should not be overlooked is that, the missiles were fired on July 4, the Independence Day in the United States.

In the past North Korean provocations always worked in favour of Pyongyang. The 1994 nuclear crisis in the Korean Peninsula saw United States and North Korea eventually signing an agreed framework. Following the launching of North Korea's first long range missile in 1998, a high level US official visited North Korea and reached a deal in which Pyongyang agreed to freeze missile launches in exchange for continued assistance.

The process even took the then US Secretary of State, Madeline Albright, to Pyongyang, being the highest level US official to visit the country ever. It might have been in the minds of North Korean leadership that they were going to make it again this time as well. But unlike the democratic leadership of the past, the Bush administration seems to be

less bothered by any indirect pressure and is more interested in trying to build international support for tougher measures against North Korea.

As a result, there is a possibility that North Korean brinkmanship and the act of defiance this time might turn out to be counter-productive. But the risk is definitely there that this might also push the country further to the corner and compel the leadership to go for even more defiant acts. Should a situation like that emerge, once again the country that has to take most of the burns would probably be Japan.

Hence, it is also in the interest of Japan to ensure that North Korea is not isolated further. And a more pragmatic approach for Japan should be to pursue Tokyo's closest ally, not to abandon the option of direct negotiation. But we know when air turns warmer, the balloon of pride seems to fly higher and higher, widening the distance between those left on the ground and those sitting in the small but cozy balloon of superficial glory.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.