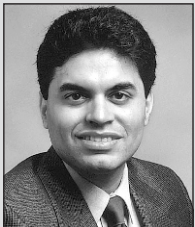


Iraq's dark day of reckoning



FAREED ZAKARIA
writes from Washington

WHEN Iraq's current government was formed last April, after four months of bitter disputes, wrangling, and paralysis, many voices in America and in Iraq said the next six months would be the crucial testing period. That was a fair expectation. It has now been almost six months, and what we have seen are bitter disputes, wrangling, and paralysis.

Meanwhile, the violence has gotten worse, sectarian tensions have risen steeply and ethnic

cleansing is now in full swing. There is really no functioning government south of Kurdistan, only power vacuums that have been filled by factions, militias, and strongmen. It is time to call an end to the tests, the six-month trials, the waiting and watching, and to recognize that the Iraqi government has failed. It is also time to face the terrible reality that Iraq's mission in Iraq has substantially failed.

More waiting is unlikely to turn things around, nor will more troops. I understand the impulse of those who want to send in more forces to secure the country. I urged just such a policy from the first week of the occupation. But today we are where we are.

Over the past three years the violence has spread and is now franchised down to neighborhoods with local gangs in control. In many areas, local militias are not even controlled by their supposed political masters in Baghdad.

When Iraq's current government was formed last April, after four months of bitter disputes, wrangling and paralysis, many voices in America and in Iraq said the next six months would be the crucial testing period. That was a fair expectation. It has now been almost six months, and what we have seen are bitter disputes, wrangling, and paralysis. Meanwhile, the violence has gotten worse, sectarian tensions have risen steeply and ethnic cleansing is now in full swing. There is really no functioning government south of Kurdistan, only power vacuums that have been filled by factions, militias, and strongmen. It is time to call an end to the tests, the six-month trials, the waiting and watching, and to recognize that the Iraqi government has failed. It is also time to face the terrible reality that America's mission in Iraq has substantially failed.

In this kind of decentralized street fighting, 10,000 or 20,000 more troops in Baghdad will not have more than a temporary effect. Nor will new American policies help. The reason that the Democrats seem to lack good, concrete suggestions on Iraq is that the Bush administration has actually been pursuing more-sensible policies for more than a year now, trying vainly to reverse many of its errors. But what might well have worked in 2003 is too little, too late in 2006. Iraq is now in a civil war. Thirty

thousand Iraqis have died there in the past three years, more than in many other conflicts widely recognized as civil wars. The number of internal refugees, mostly Sunni victims of ethnic cleansing, has exploded over the past few months, and now exceeds a quarter of a million people. (The Iraqi government says 240,000, but this doesn't include Iraqis who have fled abroad or who may not have registered their move with the government.)

The number of attacks on Shiite mosques increases every week:

there have been 69 such attacks since February, compared with 80 in the previous two and a half years. And the war is being fought on gruesome new fronts. CBS News's Lara Logan has filed astonishing reports on the Health Ministry, which is run by supporters of radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. According to Logan, hospitals in Baghdad and Karbala are systematically killing Sunni patients and then dumping their bodies in mass graves.

Iraq's problem is fundamentally political, not military. Sunnis,

Shiites, and Kurds need a deal that each can live with. Sen Joseph Biden has outlined an intelligent power-sharing agreement, but what he, or for that matter George Bush, says doesn't matter. Power now rests with the locals. And the Shiites and the Sunnis have little trust in one another. At this point, neither believes that any deal would be honoured once the United States left, which means that each is keeping its own militias as an insurance policy.

If you were a Shiite, having

suffered through a brutal insurgency and an incompetent government, would you give up your weapons? If you were a Sunni, having watched government-allied death squads kill and ethnic-cleanse your people, would you accept a piece of paper that said that this government will now give you one third of Iraq's oil revenues if you disarm?

Power-sharing agreements rarely work. Stanford scholar James Fearon points out that in the last 54 civil wars, only nine were resolved by such deals. And the success stories are telling. South Africa after apartheid is perhaps the best example. Despite gaining absolute power through the ballot, the African National Congress chose to share power with its former oppressors. No whites were purged from the army or civil service.

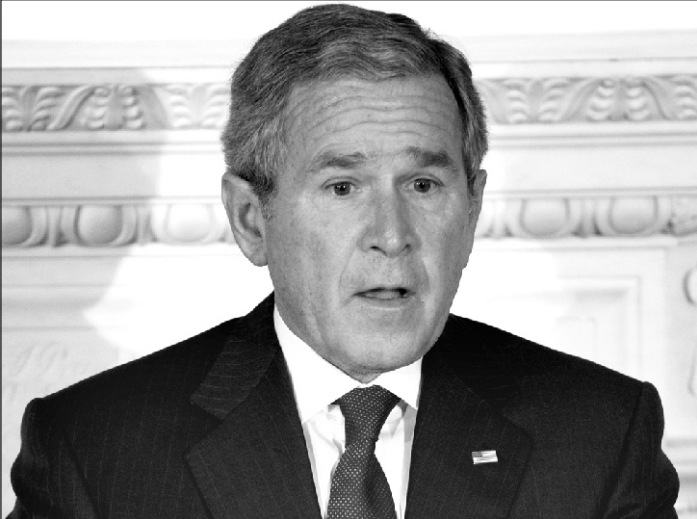
In Iraq, of course, hundreds of thousands of Sunni soldiers and administrators were fired, leaving the country without a state but with

an insurgency. And unlike South Africa, Iraq has no dominant political party. It is run by a weak and fractious coalition. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki relies on support from the very extremist groups that he must dismantle -- such as Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army.

President Bush says that if America leaves Iraq now, the violence will get worse, and terrorists could take control. He's right. But that will be true whenever we leave. "Staying the course" only delays that day of reckoning. To be fair, however, Bush has now defined the only realistic goal left for America's mission in Iraq: not achieving success but limiting failure.

Fareed Zakaria is Editor of Newsweek International.

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Irresolute politics

JUNAYED AHMED CHOWDHURY

WHAT does a Lego game have to do with the election?

Plenty, according to Dr Arthur B Markman, a professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin. His research, including one involving Lego pieces, observed the processes that people use to choose among a set of alternatives and how people see things to be similar to each other.

Dr Markman and his colleague asked a group of people to build Lego models collaboratively in an effort to understand how communicating (in this case about Lego pieces) affects the categories (of Lego pieces) that are formed.

One participant had instructions for the Lego model and one had the pieces, but neither had access to the other. The two had to rely on each other's discussions to create the Lego model.

The study found that communication did promote consistency between individuals and people who built the Lego models without communicating had low agreements between their sorts. The act

of communication influenced the people to categorise the Lego models similarly.

Dr Markman's observations were the focal point in an article written and published by the University of Texas at Austin before the 2004 US presidential election. When put in political milieu, Dr Markman's conclusions resulted in interesting upshots.

The article observed that in order to choose between the candidates for president, people need to be able to compare the candidates. They look to the candidates to talk about similar issues, to allow them to compare the candidates. When the candidates are not talking to each other, they are keeping their issues separate.

This article attempts to explore, based on Dr. Markman's observations, what is going on inside the heads of the 53% "undecided" voters after the brilliant Article Election 2007: The New Arithmetic (DS, Oct 06) by Mr Nazim Kamran Choudhury.

In Bangladesh, incongruity between the parties has been the orthodoxy in the political scenario. Further, political orientation of a

section is based generally not on ideology but on predilection, which may be historical, fiscal or hereditary. The political disparity makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the 'undecided' voter to understand, evaluate and compare the parties on equal footing.

For a voter who knows whom he or she would vote for, the element of choice is not a real issue. But for the dubious elector, inadequate and inane information creates a real barrier for choosing candidates. "From a psychological perspective, it is very hard for them to compare candidates," the University of Texas article observes.

Dr Markman noted that if the candidates actually engaged in a discussion, one of the things they would be forced to do by the end is to find issues to differ on. This, however, does not mean that the discussing parties will agree on the issues. Despite this, from the standpoint of the "undecided" voter, the advantage of access to such information is astronomical. "It means that they [the candidates] will talk about their positions using language and framing that allows for comparison," the University of Texas article observes.

The recent "dialogue" between BNP and AL on reform of caretaker government and election commission has been insidious. We all are eagerly hoping that something conducive will come out of these sessions. But whether or not the parties reach a consensus, the public should know what is on the table for discussion. Such information in the public domain would help the "undecided" voters to compare, contrast, and choose.

Dr Markman observed that when people choose between two alternatives, like between two colleges, some of the available information is comparable between the options and some is non-comparable. When comparing colleges, the academic reputation of both colleges may be known, while the quality of teaching may only be known for one college. According to him recent research has shown that people use more comparable than non-comparable information in decision making.

This observation is imperious in the context of Mr Choudhury's article. The analysis posed by him is succinct and clear and more importantly based on facts. It is available to the people to judge and decide. It

is comparative and decisive. Furthermore, the analysis of Mr Choudhury confirms, more or less, all the other polling information that has been compiled.

From the standpoint of the "undecided" voters, Mr Choudhury's analysis, like the academic reputation of both colleges in Dr Markman's example, is accessible and comparable information. The purported "dialogue" between BNP and AL behind closed doors, on the other hand, like the quality of teaching of one of the colleges, is impenetrable and non-comparable information. Therefore, to the "undecided" voters, any inaccessible and non-comparative information regarding the political parties or its candidates would be less favourable than Mr Choudhury's analysis.

Research has shown that when people make a judgment about a topic on which they are not expert, they will seek an anchor, such as a poll number or data, and then adjust their belief to fit that anchor. Currently BNP and AL are not revealing to the nation what they are hammering on behind closed doors.

Without the curtain being lifted, the psychology of human judgment,

as evidenced by Dr Markman, suggests that the "undecided" voters would have to opt for immediately available comparative information in their decision making process. To this end, I believe, Mr. Choudhury's analysis would act as an anchor for the "undecided" voters.

In election campaigns, the information is provided by people who have a vested interest in the eventual outcome. Amid a Niagara of information and plenty of spin offs, the ambivalent electorate has a mounting task in their hands. Surely, this is no child's play. Let us hope that they will use their judgment prudently when they enter the ballot room in 2007.

The author is a Barrister at Law. The author has relied heavily on and acknowledges the article titled: "The Politics of Indecision" written and published by the University of Texas at Austin before the 2004 US presidential election.

Due credit

SAFI KHAN

IT has finally happened -- Professor Yunus and Grameen Bank are Bangladesh's first Nobel Prize winners. When my wife called me with the news, my first reaction was utter disbelief; after all, we had expected this many times before but were thoroughly disappointed each year.

My next thoughts were: Why not in economics? Why so late? And will our two major political leaders be gracious enough to congratulate him? Fortunately, they along with the entire nation saluted his genius.

It was always quite clear that Prof Yunus would never be given the economics prize primarily due to intellectual snobbery that refuses to recognize work as academic unless it is explained in abstract, scholarly jargon.

Who cares if the work literally affects hundreds of million? Nonetheless, the justification of the peace prize was explained eloquently by a few speakers and more importantly it recognizes the reduction and ultimate elimination of poverty as fundamental for bringing about social justice and peace.

While many have expressed the view that Prof Yunus should have received this award earlier, on deeper reflection it probably could not have come at a better time for the nation. Today, we stand again at a very difficult and important juncture in our history.

The bankruptcy of our political and bureaucratic leadership is pushing the country into uncharted waters; the state of political confrontation may soon place us in a situation not addressed by the constitution. Yet, we see no semblance of statesmanship from either of the two major parties. We, therefore, implore the politicians to listen to the people for once and build on the present euphoria for the greater good.

Some may feel that I am being too harsh on our political leadership, but I sincerely had doubts as to whether they would be able to overcome their unsurpassable levels of pettiness to acknowledge this great day. Time and again they have demonstrated their arrogance by laying claim to all progress as theirs and theirs alone. We now hear them saying that this is a great day and honour for all Bangladeshis. Yet, do we know how cooperative they were towards Prof Yunus, Grameen Bank, and micro-credit?

Ministers and officials have repeatedly raised questions about micro-credit and interest rates. Governments have also waived rural debt for cheap populist appeal. The present government's suspicion towards one of the largest NGOs has affected their large micro-credit program, with one MP

even advocating his constituents to refrain from repaying their loans. The government while owning only 6% of Grameen Bank continues to retain three seats on the board and other powers disproportionate to their shareholding. All these actions only undermine the rural financial system.

Among the large cross section of people that have questioned and impeded Prof Yunus's work, we must pay special tribute to the bureaucracy, especially the bankers. If it were not for that first group of bank officials that questioned his every step, Prof Yunus may not have been here today. Imagine if the Janata Bank branch manager in Jobra had immediately sanctioned the loans; Prof Yunus may have gone back to teaching since his intention was for the government to adopt this program.

While the overwhelming joy around the nation was almost unanimous, I saw two newspapers that had some negativity in their editorials. One of them questioned the interest rates of Grameen Bank. This type of questioning only demonstrates that publication's ignorance and complete lack of understanding of micro-credit.

When one claims the interest rates to be high, one also needs to ask in comparison to what. If it is with conventional banks, then the comparison is flawed because conventional banks do not lend to the poor. The fact of the matter is that Grameen Bank is possibly the largest, most cost effective, and efficient lending institution for the poor anywhere in the world, with the lowest comparable interest rate.

Finally, a few words on the person. Whoever has been fortunate enough to come across Prof Yunus cannot but be impressed by his intelligence, passion, leadership, and modesty. To give an idea of his simplicity, he chooses not to have an air-conditioner in his office or home and has donated all of the money from his numerous awards to Grameen. Someone who worked with him on micro-credit in the Middle East opined on BBC that many would consider Bill Clinton to be fortunate to have met Yunus and not the other way round.

Prof Yunus has single-handedly brought far more fame for the country than all our present leaders combined. It is, therefore, essential that his work and that of his co-workers be further supported and strengthened. After all, it is not everyday that you have a Nobel Prize winner in your midst.

Safi Khan works in social development.

The brain drain

GHULAM RAHMAN

DR Abdullah A Dewan of Eastern Michigan University in an article captioned "The Brotherhood (Part 2)," published in The Daily Star on October 4, quoted from an e-mail I sent him on perusal of his article captioned "The Brotherhood of Retired Bureaucrats" published in the September 26 issue of the same paper.

Had he not omitted a sentence while quoting from my e-mail I would not have thought of writing this article. In his first article Dr Abdullah raised several questions, quoting some of his expatriate friends pointing their finger at former bureaucrats.

The observation that: "One thus wonders if the newspaper columns of many retired secretaries, disappearing policies and activities of the same politicians they served so obediently are in part a manifestation of 'crybaby syndrome' or a genuine concern now about achieving good governance" was neither appropriate nor kind.

Wasn't that a veiled attempt to present former secretaries as selfish, cowardly, and unpatriotic? Interestingly, Dr Abdullah persuaded at least one former secretary to write newspaper pieces either jointly or separately.

In a private rebuttal I wrote to Abdullah, a friend since college days: "May I ask you a simple question? Why did your friends, who

raised all these questions, leave their country of birth, which subsidized their education and gave them so much, without giving it anything in return? Had they remained here, possibly the country would have been a better place for everybody to live in. Do they really have the right to raise questions regarding the intentions of retired secretaries-turned-columnists who at least did not abandon their country of birth, and tried to serve it faithfully and to the best of their abilities? I would be delighted to see a piece by you focusing on these questions."

Dr Abdullah first wrote back that he would consider writing a piece, but then changed his mind. Instead, in the concluding paragraphs of his second article while defending his "right to criticize anything, or anyone," he discovered in my e-mail "harsh words" against him.

The way Dr. Abdullah projected his rights by omitting from my e-mail the sentence which emphasized the fact that those who left the country "seeking opportunities" abroad could have stayed back and worked towards making the country a better place, really perplexed me.

Did I question his rights as a columnist? In any case, I would like to conclude this miscommunication by quoting Voltaire: "I may not agree with what you say, but I will defend to death your right to say it. But that does not mean that I waive the right to argue with you. That is as much my constitutional right as it is yours."

I lived in the US for several years

as a Bangladesh embassy official. I observed that many who left Bangladesh "seeking opportunities" here were homesick. However, their personal situations were such that it would be really hard for them to come back. Some of them used to find bad elements like political bickering, the ever-worsening law and order situation, corruption, etc as justification for their staying abroad. They blamed politicians, bureaucrats, and businessmen from a distance for the sorry state of affairs back home.

I have no doubt about their patriotic zeal, but for them "opportunities" had greater attractions than patriotism. They suffer from a psychological conflict within themselves, but their next generation would not. In the US once I asked a boy whose family lived next door to ours: "Where are you from?" He replied, "My parents are Indians, but I am an American."

Doctors, engineers, economists and other professional people who left the country "seeking opportunities" abroad have not done anything wrong from their personal perspectives. However, I sincerely believe had people like Dr Abdullah and others who opted to live abroad been here, the country would, perhaps, have remained a better place for all of us.

In an informal survey, I found not very many meritorious students who occupied the top 20 positions in Matriculation examination in 1950s or earlier left the country for better

prospects abroad. Those who got higher degrees abroad came back home. The large-scale exodus started since independence in 1971.

Meritorious students are leaving the country in ever increasing numbers every year and settling abroad in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the US, etc as those countries offer them better opportunities than the country where their ancestors lived.

Someone told me over 100 agricultural scientists from Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRRI) left for Australia and New Zealand, taking permanent residency, but many of them are now driving taxis and doing odd jobs. Many of them had gone on training programs abroad with government scholarship. Hard working expatriate workers, who will come back sooner or later, are sending billions of dollars home, which is aiding the country's development. But, most professionals would settle abroad if they get a chance and would take resources out by disposing of whatever properties their ancestors left behind in this country.

They never realize that without them the country is poorer. One day some of them would come back when they find that this land of their ancestors has more to offer than their "dream land." I believe that day is not far away.

The former secretaries-turned-columnists have been making many good suggestions in their columns. I

find it hard to comprehend why someone should object to them and blame them for not having implemented them when they were at the helm of affairs. In most cases they did not have the authority to do so. Moreover, in the governmental system individually no one can do much.

An example may shine some light. In the second half of the 1980s, I was a director in the President's Office. One day in 1987 or early 1988 President Ershad ordered an inquiry into the affairs of House Building Finance Corporation (HBFC). A 4-member committee was constituted with Mr Rezaul Karim, the then additional secretary, Ministry of Finance as chairman and myself as member-secretary.

The committee submitted a thick report with various recommendations. The president took the trouble of reading the report minutely, underlined extensively with green ink, and approved all the recommendations in principle. The principal secretary forwarded the report to the Ministry of Finance for implementing them.

One of the recommendations, I remember, was establishment of House Building Finance Companies in the private sector. Believe it or not, the first private sector housing building finance company Delta Brac Housing Finance Corporation Ltd. (DBH) was established in 1998, a full decade later.

If the entire government machinery dealing with a particular issue

does not move in unison, no individual, however powerful he might be, can really do much, particularly if the question is of reforms and of changing the rules of the game.

To move the entire government machinery in unison, a group of meritorious and dedicated bureaucrats under the able guidance of a patriotic political leadership, driven by ideology not profit motive, is the need of the hour. Surely, the brain drain has made the emergence of such a group more difficult.

Fortunately, the country has many dedicated patriotic young men and women to put the country back on the road of peace and prosperity. In conclusion, I would like to assure the expatriates if any time any one of them finds their "dream land" unlivable or decides to return to serve the land of their forefathers, the nation would welcome them with open arms. After all, they are our siblings.

Ghulam Rahman is freelance contributor to The Daily Star.