

President's gamble

Will it heal the rift?

In a move that surprised most except for those who might have been privy to it, President Prof Iajuddin Ahmed has taken over as Chief Advisor to Caretaker Government in addition to his responsibilities as the President of the Republic. President taking the oath may have brought about a caretaker government, but the rift between the major political forces that had stalked the issue of who should be the caretaker government chief has not been healed.

The political divide that caused the rift was reflected in the oath-taking ceremony which remained unattended by the mainstream opposition as a whole. Eminent citizens, business community and professional groups were thinly represented, if at all. The President is drawn into what has so far been a bone of contention between the ruling alliance and the opposition.

However, the opposition in its reaction neither accepted nor rejected the President's takeover as caretaker government chief. They said they would observe his actions and react accordingly. We thank the opposition for its pragmatic reaction. This effectively defuses the immediate tension on the ground. People will no doubt feel relieved at this.

The whole spirit of the constitutional provision for the caretaker government rests on the principle of a consensus-based choice of the chief advisor and other advisors to the caretaker government. This principle seems to have been ironically set aside. That the decision was not consensual, the manner in which it was arrived at smacked of lack of transparency in the process undertaken and the pursuit of a consensus was not given a full chance can hardly be over emphasised.

True, a quick decision was needed to avert the growing uncertainty surrounding governance but in matters of crucial national decision-making, the process must not only be fair but must also be seen to have been fair. Otherwise, all sorts of complications could arise for want of a broad-based consultative outcome.

Undoubtedly, there are questions in the public mind whether all the five options provided by the constitution for the choice of a caretaker government chief have been exhausted before the President took the decision he did. Definitely, the fifth option of an eminent citizen acceptable to all was not even seriously tried.

The presidential decision came as a *fait accompli* and he inherits a fragmented nation. Depending on his appointment of advisors and the manner in which he acquires himself in the next few days and weeks will show whether people will have any faith in his ability to deliver his main task, namely, a free and fair election. The nation and the world are looking and he will be only as good as his actions, selection of advisors, speeches that follow his oath-taking ceremony.

Brutal killings

Political parties should restrain their workers

We condemn the recent killings on the roads in the name of political demonstration. The live depiction of people being bludgeoned to death on the roads in the most gruesome manner came as a rude shock to the peace loving citizens of the country. Demonstrators chased one another with blunt weapon, in some cases with small firearms, and at certain points some of them went totally berserk.

It was indeed a free-for-all on Saturday and Sunday when feuding party workers took law in their hands. They fought one another in a bid to take control of the key points in the city as well as in the district towns. The sights of clashes were horrendous in their manifestation and deplorable by any definition. We fail to comprehend why the keepers of law and order were not seen to be as active in quelling the frenzied crowd as they were in the last five years. Their timely and prudent action might have saved those lives.

The frenzy of the political workers, as demonstrated from time to time, reflect the entrenched viciousness in our politics. Political leaders are inherently intolerant to the opinion or rightful demands of other political parties and such attitude filters down to the workers in the lower rungs of the party. There is widespread belief that the violence unleashed on Saturday was the result of inciting words of the senior leaders of various political parties, which was virtually perceived as the war cry.

We have reasons to feel that though political leaders always talk about the welfare of the people, in reality they remain least affected when people die on the roads in most hapless manner. But such medieval system of politics is antithetical to the democratic aspiration of the people.

We hope all the political parties would ask their supporters and activists to show utmost restraint on the roads while demonstrating their points of view.

Violence cannot be the arbiter of political problems



Brig Gen
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(This piece was written prior to the assumption of the office of chief adviser by the president.)

WE have had a glimpse, over the past 24 hours, of the lawlessness and chaos as a consequence of the failed dialogue. We saw brutality of unspeakable magnitude, pitched battles between activists of the AL, BNP and Jamaat, loss of lives, and destruction of private and public property, not to speak of the tremendous inconvenience to the people returning home from the Eid holidays.

But was this inevitable? Should not the political parties display more prudence in their behaviour and realise that political differences cannot be solved through violence and confrontation? Neither the image of the country nor the state of our politics will be served, nor can the current problem be solved through violence and physical confrontation. The spate of clashes that saw attacks and counter attacks by the activists of the BNP, Jamaat, and AL on each other have so far cost more than a dozen lives.

The violence, bordering on mayhem, that we witnessed all over the country would convey to the ordinary man that in Bangladesh the final arbiter of political disputes is not logic, nor the existing constitutional provisions, nor the court of law, nor flexibility or tolerance in approaching a seemingly intractable situation, but raw muscle power manifested through perpe-

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

With the exchange of rhetoric and threats of retaliating violence with violence, time is the most crucial factor for the president. But the political parties must also rein in their activists and stop the violence immediately. It needs hardly to be said that our political leaders must display more wisdom in addressing political issues. Otherwise, democracy in our country will be dealt a severe blow, politics will get an even worse name, and more and more of our progenies will feel ashamed to be Bangladeshi.

tration of violence on political opponents.

The call by one of the parties to come prepared with staves and sticks in case the government did not meet its demands regarding the head of the caretaker government, with similar riposte by the other political party, could only be a recipe for violence. And that is what we saw on the streets in various parts of the country recently.

However, there is no further excuse for any delay, neither is there any impediment for the president to appoint the chief of the caretaker government, now that the first in line for reckoning to that post, Justice KM Hasan, the person at the centre of the current political crisis, has expressed his unwillingness to take up the post, at last.

The potential constitutional crisis, as some averred might have ensued if Justice Hasan were bypassed for the sake of avoiding further violence stemming from a serious political discord, no longer exists. Neither is there any scope for further dialogues between the two parties, as the president has suggested they sit down to, since they have failed to rise to the occasion to prevent a likely volatile situation stemming from their mutually exclusive and antagonistic stance.

The ball is firmly in the president's court and he must not waste time dribbling with it. He must play it deftly to deliver the country from a political crisis, which may witness increased

violence in the country, within the constitutional prescriptions. He must rise above personal or party predilections.

One might ask why took it so long for Justice Hasan to decide that it was not for him to assume the role of the caretaker head, given the tremendous uncertainty that we were cast into with the BNP-led coalition and the AL-led 14-party alliance, respectively, opting to hold fast to their support for, and opposition to, the former chief justice. One finds it extremely difficult to ascribe to Justice Hasan the lack of perceptivity of the possible outcome in the event he took over the post of the head of the interim government.

If it was the sake of the country's well being that has compelled him not to take up the post, was it not better coming sooner than now? A safe assumption as to why his refusal to take over the caretaker chief's role was so late in coming would be that Justice Hasan's expression of his non-availability now was not of his own volition, and the fact that he did not give it sooner was not of his own free will either. Clearly he was being back seat driven. He was under the dictat of those that wanted to see him as the head of the caretaker government at any cost, and had resorted to very disingenuous means to ensure that was what actually happened.

But, be that as it may, the country is being made to suffer because the political parties had taken irreconcilable stances on the issue

of Justice KM Hasan. Most feel that they had put their party interests before all else. It was not that they did not see it coming, but couldn't bother less about the public inconvenience, or the potential adverse impact on the country's economy, let alone the "image" that the politicians are so sensitive about. Had it been so they would have worked out a *modus vivendi* to tide over the impasse without the violence, that was entirely avoidable, but, nonetheless, something that they were not unwilling to countenance. The violence that we have witnessed over the last 24 hours may intensify unless the president takes immediate action to quell it.

It is indeed a sad commentary on the state of our politics and the political adroitness of our leaders. This was summed up by a young lady stranded on the outskirts of the capital on her way back from Eid holidays. She minced no words in saying that she was ashamed that she was a citizen of Bangladesh where politics has degenerated to merely attaining power, or clinging on to power. The common people did not matter. It perhaps echoes the feeling of many Bangladeshis about the utter irresponsibility displayed by our politicians in tackling sensitive political issues.

There are bound to be discords in a democratic set up. But in a mature democracy political discords are resolved politically, without taking recourse to violence. To sagacious politicians the interest of the people comes first;



after all, that is the purpose of politics. But not so in Bangladesh. The be all and end all is attaining power.

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leaders must display more wisdom in addressing political issues. Otherwise, democracy in our country will be dealt a severe blow, politics will get an even worse name, and more and more of our progenies will feel ashamed to be Bangladeshi.

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A slide towards the brink



M ABDUL HAFIZ

CHURCHILL believed that politics was almost as exciting as war, and quite as dangerous. One cannot but agree with the comparison after witnessing what has gone on for weeks in the name of dialogue between the two archrivals of the country's politics, and the paranoid public anxiety surrounding it.

However, the dangerous part of the analogy is about to unravel only now, when the BNP, after feigning innocence and reasonableness by dutifully going through the motions of an interlocution, is back to its self-same.

Its redoubtable secretary-general is learnt to have declared, in unequivocal terms, that Justice KM Hasan would be

the head of the caretaker administration, something that constituted the bone of contention both before and during the course of dialogue. Throwing off the unnecessary veil of pretension at long last he summarily dismissed the idea of any alternative to the arrangement scripted earlier. To add insult to injury he, however, expressed the desire to continue with the dialogue, perhaps to avoid the responsibility of the talk's failure.

This development wasn't entirely unexpected. Preparations were made by the BNP-led four party alliance, throughout its five year rule, to recapture the citadel of power to safeguard its plundered wealth and to perpetuate the

PERSPECTIVES

Notwithstanding the laudatory initiative of the business community and civil society for resolving the current impasse, what cannot but be said is that their non-partisan stance, and insistence on the two sides reaching an understanding through mutual concession or give and take, went perfectly in favour of the establishment responsible for creating the impasse. It is a crime to pretend neutrality in an hour of national crisis, as the Greek philosopher Plato once said.

pernicious practice through depravity of any kind.

The kurta-clad Jamaatis and the suited politicians of nationalist brand are beholden to each other on this point of having the best of both the worlds.

Even if they miserably failed to govern the country, making a mess of everything affecting public life like power, water, gas and fertilizers, as well as the prices of the essentials and basic security, they never hid their unabashed zeal in doctoring the next general election, an obvious hurdle in their power game.

Through organized repression and political killings they got rid of the star leaders and activists of the opposition. They politicized the entire adminis-

tration, with favourites placed in key positions. In a series of clever moves in the judiciary they ensured the appointment of a party man as the head of the caretaker government. As regards the election commission, and its bizarre and biased activities, the less one speaks, the better.

They cannot let this blueprint go haywire only because the ragtag Awami League of today objects to it. Failing to brush aside the oppositions' electoral reforms proposal, when they finally took cognizance of it, they considered the opposition's agitation and activism to be mere pinpricks, and combated it as a matter of ordinary law and order problem. But when the demand gained

momentum, and grew increasingly violent, in the power wielders' established policy of blowing and hot and cold, the alliance government thought it prudent to agree to a secretary-level talk, presumably to buy time and in the process tame the opposition.

Already beaten hollow and shattered by the officially-backed BNP cadres, the AL perforce swallowed the bait, sparking unprecedented optimism among the public. It was an ecstatic moment for the nation which instinctively pinned its hopes on the dialogue.

Yet, no discerning observer could have missed the alliance's shrewd move behind its indefinitely marking time and stretching the time frame of the dialogue to its elastic limit -- a point where the question of constitutional limitation could be conveniently raised, and the opposition persuaded to accept the fait accompli of Justice Hasan as the head of the caretaker government. In hindsight, Jalil was hardly a match for Bhuiyan's guile.

Notwithstanding the laudatory initiative of the business community and an assorted civil society for resolving the current impasse, what cannot but be

said is that their non-partisan stance, and insistence on the two sides reaching an understanding through mutual concession or give and take, went perfectly in favour of the establishment responsible for creating the impasse with foul intentions.

So, any concession given to it will be tantamount to the acceptance of conditions prejudicial to a free and fair election. While appreciating the business community's concern and patriotic impulse, it ought to be said that the approach is faulty. It is a crime to pretend neutrality in an hour of national crisis, as the Greek philosopher Plato once said. When taking sides, it may not necessarily be in favour of a party or person. One can take the side of a cause, which, in the present case, is a credible electoral process.

The shape of things with regard to the country's politics remains unclear. Neither is it clear how the authorities will contain the escalating violence. What is, however, obvious is that the polity is once again on the brink, and in the throes of a fresh violence portending a long period of uncertainty.

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FM music



M J AKBAR

FM must be music to Pranab Mukherjee's ears. Defence is a curious ministry in Delhi, demanding responsibility without power. One former prime minister, whose experience taught him the value of subservience, and whose subservience taught him the value of revenge, used to dismiss defence as the toy ministry. The toy in question was the plane which is the minister's personal privilege; the prime minister is the only other member of the cabinet to get such high-flying transport. The sly joke was that you could keep a competitor for the top job at bay by gifting this toy to play with.

For a professional politician, the problem with defence is that it has no political constituency. Home is

BYLINE

There has been a historic tendency in Delhi to confuse a Pakistan policy for a foreign policy. It is perfectly rational that Pakistan should be a primary concern, since war, in hot, cold, and intermediate forms, has always been an undercurrent of the Indo-Pak relationship. But India has to rise above turning Pakistan into an obsession. India has more than one neighbour; India should have a larger vision of its place in the world, and indeed the world's place in India.

much in demand because it provides the greatest opportunity to influence events: Kargil was an honourable, defensive, limited engagement. The last defence minister who emerged with an enhanced reputation was Jagjivan Ram, who held the portfolio during the 1971 war. That was also the last real war which India fought and won. The best that an eminent politician like Sharad Pawar might say after a stint in the job is that he did not do any damage to himself.

The defence minister's principal job is to ensure that the capability of the armed forces is always a few regiments/missiles/planes greater than the enemy. He is therefore by far the biggest purchaser in the government.

The arms bazaar is arguably the world's most corrupt legitimate business. Since security is such a holy cow, the arms dealer knows that he can get away with a pricing policy that would invite howls of derisive anger in any other deal. The efficacy of a product is no guarantee against corruption. If there is one gun that has proved its worth to Indian security then surely it is Bofors. The whiff of acid fumes from that smoking gun still permeates through Indian politics. George Fernandes has discovered what can happen to a lifetime reputation for fiscal honesty. Accusations do not have to be proved to condemn a politician. Just making them is enough. There is simply too much sleaze, and very few strains of

khadi are immune from dirt.

Pranab Mukherjee had reached that point in his tenure where mud had begun to leave a pattern upon his reputation. It was just the moment for a switch, for the next session of Parliament is likely to see a great deal of Scorpene mud flying across the hall. The switch is brilliant, because the new defence minister, AK Antony, is allegedly made of stainless steel. He will need all the stainless steel in his armour to deflect the mud. Dr Manmohan Singh has proved wiser than his predecessor Atal Behari Vajpayee, who restored Fernandes when the latter, by any political yardstick, has passed his shelf-life in the ministry.

Is the foreign ministry lower in the

pecking order of Delhi's hierarchy? The question is odd, since the foreign minister not only has a crucial role to play in policymaking but also has a political job to do.

Pranab Mukherjee takes over at a moment when there is a serious job waiting to be done. Ever since Natwar Singh's sudden departure, the foreign ministry has been an orphan. The prime minister's efforts to play surrogate mother have merely exposed his inadequacies in a nuanced responsibility. Pranab Mukherjee is fortunate in his new foreign secretary, Shiv Shankar Menon, an excellent career diplomat without either baggage or, worse, pretensions. Together they might, as a start, consider clearing up three confusions.

There has been a historic tendency in Delhi to confuse a Pakistan policy for a foreign policy. It is perfectly rational that Pakistan should be a primary concern, since war, in hot, cold, and intermediate forms, has always been an undercurrent of the Indo-Pak relationship. But India has to rise above turning Pakistan into an obsession. India has more than one neighbour; India should have a larger vision of its place in the world, and indeed the world's place in India.

Worse, Pakistan policy in the last year or so can best be described as

legwork. When Delhi is in a mood for goodwill, its knee begins to jerk. When terrorism inevitably comes back into focus, anger turns into a footlash. There is often the absurdity of the knee jerking towards goodwill while, simultaneously, the foot begins to kick. It is not, to say the least, the most elegant form of diplomatic ballet. Pakistan policy needs greater balance, more composure, less romanticism and sustained engagement.

The second confusion is a direct by-product of Dr Manmohan Singh's almost personal drive to create a nuclear deal with the United States. I have said this before, and it bears repetition: there is nothing wrong with the idea barring those little intrusive and unacceptable conditionalities that could compromise India's independent nuclear military capability. But the management of this policy is flawed by a fundamental misunderstanding of foreign policy.

We have made a basic mistake in confusing George Bush with America. We have a Bush policy rather than an America policy. Obviously, an American president is the key to many doors in Washington, but a more careful and professional approach would have calibrated the outcome by measuring, coolly, how much

political capital Bush had left after the Iraq quagmire, and how much of this capital he was ready to spend on selling a difficult deal on terms that would be acceptable to India.

I imagine that a few people in Delhi at this moment are as anxious about the results of the Congressional elections in the first week of November as Bush is. If Bush is defeated, he will spend the next two lame-duck years trying to rescue his Republican Party from the consequences of a military and political debacle in Iraq. He has already begun to admit, albeit reluctantly, that he did not quite know what he was doing.

The third on my list is possibly more self-delusion than confusion. For some months now, this government has been signalling, privately, that all opposition to the US nuclear deal, or to Bush, is "communal." Such an assumption comes easily to a non-political mind. It was surely fuelled by the sight of a hundred thousand Muslims demonstrating against Bush's visit to Delhi. When Bush uses terms like "Islamic fascism" and is responsible for countless innocent deaths, it is hardly unnatural for Muslims to feel that they have been made victims of a powerful individual's megalomania.

As citizens of a free country they have every right to express their views. If Dr Singh had not confused Bush with America, he would have seen a larger reality: that the majority of Americans are liberal and democratic, and they would be fooled for only some of the time.

One of the great failings of our present foreign policy is that we have withdrawn from our traditional areas of influence for fear of upsetting George Bush. We are, most vitally, not engaged in the Middle East when great crises in that region will shape events over the foreseeable future. We have diluted our credibility by weakening our voice. Iraq has been a traditional friend of India but there is no evidence of history in the government's policy towards the country or the region. India could have been, and should have been, a player in the conflict-resolution process that will be the next phase of the Middle East dynamic.

That reservoir of goodwill for India is not completely empty. Pranab Mukherjee, who worked so closely with Mrs Indira Gandhi, should know that. He is now in a position to replenish that reservoir.

And he does not have much time.

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