

Depoliticise the administration

Recasting Election Commission (EC) essential

We commented in this column very recently that the two most important actions that the caretaker chief must take immediately are ensuring the formation of his council of advisors and taking all necessary steps to guarantee a free and fair election. While the former has been done, the latter requires equally urgent action, if not more.

Towards holding a free, transparent and fair election the imperative for the caretaker chief and the president is to recast the EC. Needless to say the parliamentary election should not only be held fairly and freely it must be seen by the people that it has indeed been so. And for that to happen, the people must have trust in the transparency of the actions of the EC and confidence in those that run it. Regrettably, there are reservations on both the counts.

The position of The Daily Star on the CEC has been unambiguous. The readers might recall that we had urged upon him to leave his post when the highest court of law of the country passed its no confidence on the action of the EC regarding updating of the voter list. Not only did the CEC not follow the set procedures of updating the list, he also disregarded the High Court's directive to follow the prescribed methods under the pretext of appeal to the Supreme Court, which he lost. That has caused him to lose all moral grounds to hold on to a very important democratic institution like the EC.

Similar reservation has also been expressed about some of the commissioners appointed later, particularly about one elevated from the post of EC secretary. Their removal will certainly eliminate the perception of opacity on the functioning of the EC. Added to this is also the need to make the voter list more accurate. This must be undertaken immediately and advice of the experts may be sought in this regard. Voter ID card with photographs is the most ideal arrangement but constraints of time may preclude such arrangement. However, the EC must consider seriously having transparent ballot boxes.

It is also essential to have a depoliticised administration for holding a free and fair election. And for this the chief advisor should cancel all postings that were made by the erstwhile ruling party on partisan grounds with the election in mind. Although some changes have been made we feel these are cosmetic and extremely inadequate. Changes must also be effected at the upazilla and district levels if the confidence of the people in the system is to be restored.

These are imperatives that brook no delay.

Politics of retaliation and violence must cease

Tolerance is the need of the day

FOR several days now we have witnessed unprecedented violence leading to a number of deaths all over the country. These commenced with the AL chief calling upon her workers to concentrate in Dhaka with staves and sticks in support of its demand regarding the caretaker chief. The counter calls soon after, by Tariq Rahman, resulted in street agitations, joined by rowdy elements from amongst the public. Call for an eye for an eye by Col (Retd) Oli Ahmed, a senior leader of the newly formed LDP, and the most recent statement made at a public meeting by none other than the former prime minister and BNP chairperson, calling for retaliation against her opponents, are matters of worry for us. These bode very badly for our politics and put a big question mark on our character as a nation of foraging and tolerant people.

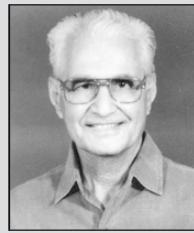
Many lives have been lost in the most brutal way not seen in this country in many years. It has also dealt a serious blow to our economy, not to speak of the unprecedented sufferings it has caused the public. It has also considerably damaged our image all over the world. Needless to say, we are deeply saddened and concerned by this acute level of political violence.

We earnestly appeal to all the political parties to shun the path of violence once for all. Violence begets violence. Have we not had enough of killings in the nationwide programme of political agitation that reached the level of anarchy?

It is of utmost importance for the political parties to exercise good sense and restraint. Politically we may continue to argue as to who did what to whom, but let us not forget that time is running out. It should be remembered that the country does not belong to the political parties alone. The real owners of the country are the people.

We simply cannot afford repetition of the ugly incidents that we witnessed recently all over the country. Surely we do not wish to leave behind a legacy for our future generation for which they will have nothing but remorse for us.

Elusive opposition unity



MB NAQVI

writes from Karachi

PLAIN WORDS

Several conclusions follow for opposition in this country. A blanket unity of all anti-Musharraf forces is neither possible nor actually desirable. Unity among democrats and liberal elements is the need of the hour. But as long as, there is the military regime in power, a broad unity of all for an interim transition period should be worked for. This means two things: one, let an interim united front of those who want a regime change be created for only electioneering, with some agreement on what should immediately follow. Two, let there be a second election on purely party platforms soon after the first that may have been won by far too many parties with no clear cut common purpose.

OPOSITION unity in Pakistan is like will-o'-the-wisp: it is now here, soon it is not here. Therefore many alliances have emerged by mergers of like-minded parties. There has been much heaving and pushing to create a grand alliance of ARD and MMA. Almost everyone who wants the present army-backed regime of Gen Pervez Musharraf to go (along with the army's control over the state apparatus) wants united front of all opposition parties. But the parties get more divided as they try to unify because the regime brings up issues from time to time that primarily divide the opposition and unity attempts founder on these rocks.

The amendments vaguely proposed by Musharraf to Hudood Ordinance successfully

divided most parties (including the ruling PMLQ); but the prospect of ARD and MMA working together to topple the Musharraf regime may have vanished. MMA cannot countenance any change in Zia-made Ordinances to further Islamise Pakistan. Overwhelming Muslim Pakistanis are not aware whether they had been insufficiently Muslim all these many centuries or they have become more purified Muslims since Zia promulgated them. Now, women of almost all shades of opinion want their scrapping, except of course those who agree with religious parties' view that Islamic jurisprudence and punishment, as drafted by Zia, cannot be tampered with.

ARD's largest party, PPP, wants abrogation of these Ordinances; other major party in ARD, PML(N), has gone along with PPP rather reluctantly in order to keep ARD united and is committed to overthrowing Musharraf by winning the 2007 elections; but it is not too enthusiastic about abrogating them entirely; some amendments "yes" but striking them down altogether, "no" seems to be their position. Musharraf keeps dangling the Damocles sword of amending these Islamic Ordinances by Parliament. Although, his supporters are a majority but they are also bitterly divided over the issue: PMLQ's leadership supports these Islamic Ordinances, while urban-

poll when nobody is looking at what the spooks are doing.

Gen Musharraf is beautifully answering the objection that in-office heads of state and/or of government do not write their memoirs said something revealing: "I am not mad to wait for retirement; should I write my book after my death." In other words, he does not envisage any retiring; he proposes to remain in power till he dies (in office). That seals the fate of 2007 election; it will probably yield even better results than 2002 election did that put him on the great giddi.

There has been much wishful thinking about foreigners -- the US, Commonwealth, and other worthies -- wanting democratic pols in 2008; the winners will confirm Musharraf's presidency up to 2012 -- and perhaps up to 2017, and maybe beyond. For opposition, there is no short cut. It is not that nobody knows how dictators can be dismounted. There are two main ways: one is to try to make a bloody Revolution. One would strongly advise against it. Why? because the net result of any bloody revolution is another and more powerful dictator's installation. The whole exercise is pointless. But the need for a revolution does not go away.

Pakistanis have so far seen five neutral caretaker governments and supposedly autonomous election commissions; results broadly showed that each time the Pakistani electorate

voted the way the army chief of the day wanted. State apparatus, as now constituted, is a well-honed machine; it yields the results that the Mechanic-in-Chief desires. People should ask this simple question: who will choose the neutral caretakers or the "independent" CEC, for that matter? Why? by Musharraf, of course. The next question is: Can he afford to retire either from the army or leave the Presidential Palace? Obviously, he cannot: a dictator rides a tiger; he cannot dismount.

The opposition has to take this prospect seriously. They will be mighty surprised at the election results in the early days of 2008; the winners will confirm Musharraf's presidency up to 2012 -- and perhaps up to 2017, and maybe beyond. For opposition, there is no short cut. It is not that nobody knows how dictators can be dismounted. There are two main ways: one is to try to make a bloody Revolution. One would strongly advise against it. Why? because the net result of any bloody revolution is another and more powerful dictator's installation. The whole exercise is pointless. But the need for a revolution does not go away.

Those who want to see people enjoy all freedoms will always opt for non-violent people's effort to

set themselves free so as to reorganize society, economy and state in a way that will truly benefit them rather than the traditional elite groups.

Here a certain wrong misperception must be removed. Going for a violent change is an easier, more effective and natural way of reacting. Natural it may be but effective or easy it is not. Most anti-democratic states employ their spooks to encourage young hot heads to take to violent opposition. Secret cells are easy to infiltrate, subvert, misguide and to crush them by state's greater and efficient violence. While open politics by reasoning is far more effective, though at first sight it seems to require a very long time. This is not really true. Violent change can, and is, hijacked by fascistic dictators. Political education does not take too long and yields results more quickly, accidents apart.

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Beyond Iajuddin, the darkness must lift

GROUND REALITIES

But if he can call forth the courage to go after the corrupt elements of the BNP-led government, even as he goes about organising the election, and haul them up before the law, he will convince us that he has the ability and scope to grow in office. He will need to prove that he has emerged, clearly and powerfully, from the shadow of those who once placed him in the presidency. If he can do that, he can look forward to a good place in national history. If he cannot, it will once more be time for the country to go looking for the man or woman who will have it in him or her to lead us out of the woods.

men and women who have suffered through a bad gamble. It is others, like those journalists in hot pursuit of their editor, who have paid the price for their indiscretions and their venality.

Speaking of gambles, you might now wish to reflect on all the indiscretions the BNP-wallahs have been doing lately, where arranging the next general elections is concerned. Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan was observed reassuring the country, even after that last dialogue-related meeting with Abdul Jalil, that the talks between his party and the Awami League had not broken down. That left us all with some faint hope that a miracle could occur in the end, and life for us would return to a semblance of normality.

But the gods and the BNP, unbeknownst to us, had something else in store for the country. As the nation celebrated Eid, and willed itself into forgetting, for some time, the political crisis paralysing the country, Mannan Bhuiyan and his friends in the BNP opened up a new, nauseatingly raw wound for all of us.

They insisted that there was no question of Justice KM Hasan not becoming the head of the next caretaker government. The contradiction between word and deed could not have been clearer. Bhuiyan's deliberate torpedoing of the talks with Jalil ran counter to his earlier assurance that the

negotiations had not broken down. After that, it was only a matter of time before all hell broke loose.

And hell opened up, in fury, when Khaleda Zia went on her own mind-boggling radio and television offensive to offer a newer twist to the term bizarre. If it was not lies she was hurling at the country about the work of her administration in the past five years, it was unvarnished untruth she peddled before us.

It is rather an uncomfortable feeling knowing that there are powerful people who are blissfully content to live in a world of unreality. When you have a prime minister who thinks that night is day, that darkness is light, indeed that a hundred and forty million people are a mass of gullible human beings, you are tempted to ask: How could such people manage to rise so high in politics, high enough to be given the power to rule a country of good, honest human beings?

How is it that the BNP, and its partners in government, have so callously, and so foolishly, failed to read the writing on the wall all these years? They have never had the opportunity to feel what men like Col. Oli Ahmed have never failed to see. You might argue that such men as Oli Ahmed and Sheikh Razzak Ali have had their reasons to grouse because they could not land good jobs in the government. That is surely something you cannot ignore.

On a wider span, though, it is the courage, indeed the unequivocal sentiments in these men that should impress you. When Oli Ahmed demands that the corrupt and the invidious, ranging from the Zia family and running all across the unending regions of their minions, be prevented from leaving the country and thereby escaping justice, you know how miserable a state we have all been pushed into by a regime that was as remarkable for its intellectual vacuum as it was for its grasping habits.

And yet Khaleda Zia says she has done wonders for the country in these five terrible years. The result of those wonders is out there in the open -- all around us are images of the kind of popular revolt which soon becomes known as People Power. The rampaging fury of the population is something we condemn, and insist that it be checked vigorously.

Then again, we will be doing ourselves a truly good favour if we channel all this anger, all this fury, into a systematic, insistent, and continuous mass protest against a bunch of individuals who have either not performed or have performed in bizarre manner. The functionaries of the now departed alliance government have compelled, more than once, newspaper editors into seeking bail through leading hordes of their

mob-like followers into judges' rooms, and having warrants of arrest issued against these defenders of freedom of speech.

The now-out-of-office finance minister, even as he railed against corruption, did not see that he was indeed promoting it through letting evil men transform their ill-gotten money into legitimate wealth. You could go on and on about the doings of nearly every man and woman who has been part of, or was associated with, the alliance government.

Let it suffice, for now, to know that where corrupt elements have often infiltrated governments all over the globe, the government we have just said farewell to has been a whole, unadulterated symbol of corruption itself. Within the Prime Minister's Office, and in the damp, ominous-looking corridors of Hawa Bhaban have lurked the elements whose contributions to our state of misery hardly need any restating.

But we will not quibble, if only because the men and women who have misgoverned in these five years have now found their way out of power. Yes, to be sure, we can raise a howl of protest at the clearly lopsided manner in which President Iajuddin Ahmed has taken charge of the caretaker administration. We will watch him, as the opposition will watch him, with eagle eyes in the next few days and weeks, to know if he is in a position to preside over a free, fair and transparent election.

If he means to take the country back on the road to constitutional, democratic politics, he will need to act in a pretty large number of areas. Priority-wise, it is the Election Commission, as it is constituted at present, that must go. MA Aziz and the three election commissioners have lost their credibility, and no matter how much they promise to be good from here on we cannot bring ourselves to believe that they can give us an acceptable election.

The president must then move forcefully into shaking up and reshaping the administrative apparatus by removing from positions of strategically important authority all those civil and police bureaucrats whose loyalty to the alliance government has been a major source of popular discontent in these last few years.

We would not have reason to voice all these worries had the President followed the constitution and permitted Justice Mahmudul Amin Chowdhury, or Justice Hamidul Haq, to organise the caretaker administration. But since Iajuddin has been head of state, courtesy of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, it is difficult to accept the notion that he will now, in miraculous manner, transform himself into a leader for an entire country.

But if he can call forth the courage to go after the corrupt elements of the BNP-led government, even as he goes about organising the election, and haul them up before the law, he will convince us that he has the ability and scope to grow in office. He will need to prove that he has emerged, clearly and powerfully, from the shadow of those who once placed him in the presidency. If he can do that, he can look forward to a good place in national history. If he cannot, it will once more be time for the country to go looking for the man or woman who will have it in him or her to lead us out of the woods.

Beyond Iajuddin Ahmed, beyond the departure of the alliance administration, there is the paramount requirement for an election that will throw up a government as dedicated to upholding national history as it is toward charting a clear, democratic and secular course to the future. It is time for our long, frightening darkness to lift.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Executive Editor, Dhaka Courier.

Q UITE a few bizarre things have lately been happening in Bangladesh. In case you have not noticed, ours is perhaps one of those rare places where the editor of a newspaper is compelled to exit an aircraft that was about to spirit him away to foreign shores, all because he had left those working under him high and dry through activities not quite above board.

You might now ask why that particular editor needed to buy all those five tickets for a simple flight to a foreign city, and then find himself pursued by all those angry media people who had once thought that he was their guardian. Well, here was the guardian trying to leave the country after committing that most outrageous of acts -- closing down the newspaper he had been editing for so long.

And why must an individual, who imagines he is a professional upright journalist, think of fleeing the country, unless he is afraid of what might happen to him, and his kind, in the days ahead? Ah, you realise with a start, professionalism and uprightness simply do not form the bedrock of performance for such journalists. Opportunism does.

But we will let that be, for now. There is little point in dwelling on men and women who have consistently made it a pastime to gamble with life and its opportunities, and then quit the field. It is not these

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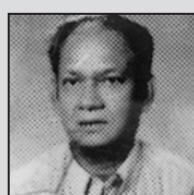
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Light at the end of the tunnel



ARSHAD-uz ZAMAN

T HE assumption of the office of the chief of the caretaker government by Prof Iajuddin Ahmed, the president of the Republic, is like a breath of fresh air in the darkening horizon of Bangladesh. People will breathe a sigh of relief.

The truth of the matter is that the nation had reached a total impasse due to the inability of the political parties to communicate with each other. This is when the full personality and decisiveness of the mild mannered professor, who was constitutionally barred from playing anything but a ceremonial role, came into full play, and he rose to the occasion. He has taken oath of office of chief of the caretaker government and saved the nation from imminent disaster. Heartiest congratulations Prof Iajuddin Ahmed, and I as a humble citizen of Bangladesh, along with million others, will pray for your success.