

Ex-minister's revelations

We are not surprised

CORRUPTION and the erstwhile government of the 4-party alliance have become so synonymous that we are not the least bit surprised at the revelation made by the ex-minister for power, who was once a BNP MP and now a member of the newly formed LDP, of plunder of the power sector during the last five years of the alliance rule. Nonetheless we are astounded by the enormity of the sum involved and the impunity with which the sector was denuded of its funds.

The cavalier fashion with which corruption had been resorted to during the alliance rule highlights the danger of crony capitalism in our country where petty personal interests subsume larger national interest. The plundering of the power sector and also a report of how two diammonium phosphate projects, taken up during the AL rule and suspended when the alliance took over power in 2001 on grounds of corruption, were revived by the alliance government obviously after palms were greased in the right places, speak volume.

Coming as it does from the horse's mouth, he being once an insider and having seen the going on in the ministry and the sector even for a very brief period, we cannot but take his words with some credibility.

The most unbearable agony that the people suffered were caused by the acute shortage of power in the last five years. Agriculture suffered in the northern areas due to shortage of power. Yet, from the ex-minister's account, apparently there was no shortage of funds at the disposal of the power ministry not only to refurbish the old plants, of which very little was done, but for adding new plants of which nothing was done except the Tongi plant that spluttered and stuttered before grinding to halt soon after its commission. Tk 15,000 crore was spent and not a single megabyte added in the last five years! It is simply inexcusable.

Now that the cat is out of the bag and that the adviser in-charge of power has indicated that he would publish a white paper on corruption in the sector, the government must take these reports seriously and not stop only at publishing of white paper. Exemplary punishments must be meted out to those that are responsible for plundering our national wealth, not only in the power sector but in all other sectors as well.

Minority voters

Ensure their security

MEMBERS of the civil society have appealed to the caretaker government to adopt such measures as will enable the voters belonging to the minority communities to vote in the next elections without being intimidated, or coerced into supporting any particular party. The appeal, we believe, is based on the fact that minority communities were subjected to harassment and repression across the country after the 2001 elections.

The communalisation of the electoral process will further debilitate democracy in the country which is now passing through a grave crisis. If minority voters are not allowed to vote freely, a big chunk of the population will be left out of the democratic process and it may also influence--obviously in a totally unacceptable manner--the results of the polls.

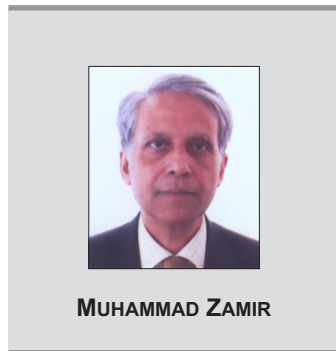
Regrettably, it is the four-party alliance which is facing the charge of having targeted the minorities following the 2001 elections that the alliance actually won decisively. Nevertheless, they decided to punish the minority voters who they believe had not supported them. Wasn't it a culpable crime that actually brought disgrace to the nation as a whole? Nowhere in the civilized world are people persecuted because of their political belief.

The political parties are supposed to win the hearts of the minority communities through their work, instead of relying on muscle-power. Democracy, or any system of governance for that matter, will fail to deliver if the political parties still resort to barbaric practices that should have been a thing of the past by this time in our society.

Equally regrettable is the unpalatable truth that nobody has ever been brought to justice for intimidating the minority voters, though there is documentary evidence that such crimes were committed time and again by the communal forces.

The caretaker government should address the issue, if only because it has a direct bearing on around 80 lakh minority voters still haunted by the ranking memories of the 2001 elections. The government has to ensure that nobody is harassed for his/her religious identity while exercising a democratic right guaranteed by the constitution.

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MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

OCTOBER was an eventful month. On 13th October hope came dancing in through our national window in the form of the Nobel Prize for Peace awarded to Professor Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank. Later, on 29th October, came the formal conclusion of the BNP Alliance Government through the transfer of power to the Caretaker Government.

We are today, at a critical juncture of our national aspiration. We continue to be faced with many serious unanswered questions. Unnecessary obstinacy on the part of some, is threatening the entire electoral process and the future pursuit of democracy. The possibility of confrontation has again emerged. Such a situation can only lead to regression. We cannot afford it.

In recent times, we have suffered because of lack of good governance, unbridled corruption, skyrocketing prices of essentials, acute shortage of power, terrorist activities of Islamic militants, politicisation of the Administration and the Judiciary, violation of individual human rights, gross excesses by the police and extrajudicial killings. To this was added the failure on the part of the previous administration to separate the judiciary from the Executive and its enthusiasm with regard to 'election-engineering'. This latter controversial factor particularly undermined the principles of

democracy.

To this mix was also added many other failures. It included issues like unresolved high-profile political assassinations and inability in punishing those involved in the attempted murder of Sheikh Hasina, Leader of the Opposition, and other senior members of the Awami League leadership. Justice was also not meted out to those guilty of the tragic killings carried out on 15 August, 1975.

Nevertheless, today, we have

taken to make the future process meaningful. These will be vital to create a level playing field. They include cancelling of all contractual appointments in sensitive posts, particularly where the Chief Adviser is himself in charge. This will be particularly relevant with regard to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Home Affairs. Controversial, partisan officials, associated with the judicial process and maintenance of law and order, also need to be

not only to maintenance of law and order but also to the measures required to make the electoral process acceptable to all parties.

For the first time we have a unique situation where the President is also the Chief Adviser. It is true that the paradigm has become more complex and the equation of check and balance has been affected. Nevertheless, the opportunity exists whereby the people of Bangladesh, in the month of January next year, can

requisite partnership for development, so necessary for meeting the Millennium Development Goals.

We must not overlook what the World Food Programme has found in their latest study. Despite the exaggerated claims of massive economic development by the last Government, it has been stated that fifteen per cent of rural households in Bangladesh consist of the invisible poor who are extremely marginalised, chronically hungry

not be compromised if we are to successfully fight the disease of corruption. This Caretaker Government can also set the right example in this regard.

The Fourteen-Party Alliance, despite provocation from the other side, has shown great maturity and constructive engagement in giving additional time to the Caretaker Administration to prove their fairness, even-handedness and neutrality in the electoral process. This must be seen to be done.

The successful performance of the President and his team of Advisers will re-affirm that the people of this country believe in a format of participatory governance where there is equality of opportunity and everyone has the right to be heard. Such a course of action will nullify the need later on, to appoint lobbyists to put a spin on our image overseas with one hundred articles.

The precedence of good governance set by this Caretaker Government will also provide the required moral strength to the next Government to confront bank defaulters, to get rid of syndicates that artificially manipulate prices of essentials and to punish those vested interests that have created the current sorry state in the different utilities sectors. The action displayed by the Caretaker Administration will also encourage the next elected government to address with greater seriousness the question of militancy and fundamentalism that has cast a shadow on our rights as individuals.

The President and his team have to take bold decisions that reflect the will of the people and are consistent with the Constitution.

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POST BREAKFAST

ahead of us, a new beginning. We also have fresh opportunities that must not be lost.

At this point of time, jurists, educationists and professionals have identified certain least common denominators for action by the non-party Caretaker Administration.

These include the hope that we should have a free and fair election on the basis of a corrected updated voters' list. The Caretaker Administration has also been made aware of the need to reform the composition of the Election Commission. We know that this will not be easy. However, when a patient needs bitter medicine, it has to be administered even if it might not be palatable. If this requires the convening of the Supreme Judicial Council, let that be done.

The path ahead will not be easy, but certain measures have to be

replaced immediately. The State controlled media also have to be instructed in no uncertain terms that they should rise above partisanship and try to present news, without prejudice, as the events take place.

I believe that this Caretaker Administration can, if they so want, rise above petty, partisan points of view and vested interests. This is important, because at the end of the day, the fairness of this Caretaker Administration could symbolize to the next Government that 'winner takes all' philosophy is not the best way for ensuring governance.

The President, who is also the Chief of the Caretaker Government, will have to take firm action as has been suggested by Nobel Laureate M Yunus during the special reception accorded to him on 5 November in Bangabhaban. I am referring here

and mostly headed by females. The survey has also indicated that such households are usually landless (consequently devoid of obtaining credit through functional co-lateral) and that each family has a large number of dependents. Determined efforts must be undertaken to make the invisible poor 'visible' so that they can benefit from socio-economic gains. We need to wake up and stem this rot. How can we remain in the same bracket as Laos and Papua New Guinea? I believe that the first step towards future poverty reduction lies in the holding of a free and fair election that can lead to the creation of an effective Parliament.

The next important task of the Caretaker Government has to be the restoration of confidence in governance, the police force and the judiciary. These are vital pillars of the State that cannot and must

approval by an all-party conference, it would be implemented even if the LTTE rejected it. The blueprint, it seems, is the document which Rajapakse may bring to Delhi when he visits it in the last week of November.

There is no firm information about the blueprint. But the different leaders say that it is based on the "Indian model." Still, nobody is willing to commit himself to a federal structure. Some ministers

common ground at Geneva. The LTTE delegation had, indeed, expected some resilience from the government. The delegation is said to have planned even a short trip to Europe to relax. But it had to return immediately to explain to their people what went wrong. I was at Colombo at that time.

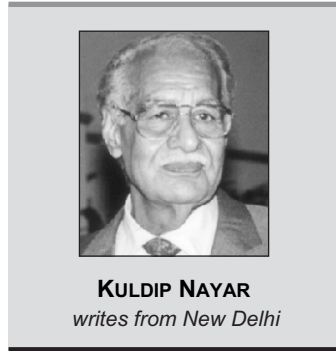
That was the night when there was a knock at my door at a hotel in Colombo. Some 12 police men were there to search the room. They examined my passport and looked into the cupboard. And then they went away, without offering an apology. "We were checking," one police man said. My hotel was in a Tamil area and hence the search to find if some of the LTTE men was hiding there.

Currently, the Tamils are a target of extortions. Practically, every day there is an incident when a Tamil businessman is kidnapped for ransom of millions of rupees. The President has been given details of many cases, with no result. The abducted have bargained on their own and paid the ransom. The suspicion is that an armed group, in connivance with the authorities, has come up with an understanding with the Karuna faction, a breakaway group of the LTTE.

It may be a dismal scene. But some of us, NGOs, have spent five days in Colombo to bring the Sinhalese and the Tamils nearer to one another. It is an effort to foster people-to-people contact. If it could work between Indians and Pakistanis, why can't it between the Tamils and the Sinhalese?

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Pride versus possession



KULDIP NAYYAR
writes from New Delhi

SOME countries learn from their mistakes, some don't. Sri Lanka belongs to the latter category. The sufferings of the Tamils, a minority, and the privations of the Sinhalese, the majority, should have made the country realise that both have to live together and that violence will not solve any problem. Still, the Sri Lankan government has bombed some areas in the northern parts where the Tamils live. Civilian casualties are natural, although trained Pakistani pilots are reportedly connected with the operation. True, President Mahinda Rajapakse won elections one year ago on the plank of toughness. But he also promised equal participation to all communities. When he rushed to India soon after assuming power to meet Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, it was evident that Rajapakse had chosen the path of making up with the Tamils. The process leading to the Geneva talks confirmed that.

However, Colombo's stand at Geneva falsified the assumption because it refused to open the blocked road connecting South with North. Even when it would have meant a step towards nor-

malisation and facilitated movement of food convoys to the Tamils in Jaffna, the Rajapakse government did not relent. The military and the monks, the two powerful entities influencing Rajapakse, had their way. But the government lost an opportunity to pin down the LTTE, a militant outfit, to peaceful methods.

Even after the failure, Rajapakse could have picked up the pieces from Geneva and reassembled

to be the only representative of the community. But the Sinhalese do not seem to realise that the LTTE is the symptom, not the disease. The disease is mistrust and the decades-old neglect of the Tamils. They have no jobs, no sense of security and no status in the society which is dominated and dictated by the Sinhalese. Had the latter tried to retrieve them and given them back their pride which they lost at the hands of chauvinist Sinhalese,

Sinhalese and the Tamils live in the world of their own, with very little contact. Muslims, nearly eight per cent of the population, could become a bridge between the two communities. But although they are Tamil speaking, of Indian origin, they tend to side with the Sinhalese. One, because the latter are the rulers and, two, because the LTTE has forcibly ousted the Muslims from their lands in the eastern province

which the LTTE claim. (The Supreme Court has annulled the merger of the two provinces and has asked the government to implement its verdict.) Although the hardliners among the Sinhalese are having their way, the general desire is to harness the support of the Tamils who are nearly 20 per cent. They are diligent, hardworking and ready to cooperate. But the price which they demand is the participation in the affairs of Sri Lanka. Rajapakse knows this. He has appointed a committee of experts to prepare a blueprint for 'devolution' of power. Wickremasinghe said that after its

It is not surprising to find that the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE did not find any common ground at Geneva. The LTTE delegation had, indeed, expected some resilience from the government. But it had to return immediately to explain to their people what went wrong. Currently, the Tamils are a target of extortions. Practically, every day there is an incident when a Tamil businessman is kidnapped for ransom of millions of rupees. The President has been given details of many cases, with no result. The abducted have bargained on their own and paid the ransom. The suspicion is that an armed group, in connivance with the authorities, has come up with an understanding with the Karuna faction, a breakaway group of the LTTE.

BETWEEN THE LINES

them at Colombo. He had already spanned the distance with opposition leader Ranil Wickremasinghe and lessened dependence on the JVP, Sri Lanka's RSS. Instead, the President went for the military option. This would only push the Tamils further into the lap of the LTTE which had become their shield, much to the disappointment of liberals among them. "Where do we go?" asked an aged Tamil MP at Colombo. The Sinhalese who constitute more than 70 per cent of the country's population of 19 million blame the Tamils for strengthening the LTTE which has killed even moderate Tamil leaders

the Tamils would have revolted against the ruthless LTTE and its fascist leader V Prabhakaran. The shoddy treatment meted out to the Tamils is the grist to LTTE's propaganda mill. It has only to point out how the Tamils have been edged out from practically every field. Even the language, Tamil, supposed to be at par with the Sinhala, is hardly used in the bureaucracy, the police or any official organ. For example, the police in Jaffna, a Tamil town, records complaints only in Sinhala. They have no Sinhalese in the force.

This situation prevails almost all over in Sri Lanka. The

talk about the pup which India's Minister for Panchayati Raj, Mani Shankar Aiyar, has sold them in the shape of panchayat system to decentralise power. But this indicates that the Sinhalese do not want to part with real power. The much vaunted provincial councils, brought about by amending the constitution, have been a failure. They cannot have any legislation passed. It is for parliament to do so. Even trivial things like a culvert or an electricity pole are decided by the minister in charge.

Therefore, it is not surprising to find that the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE did not find any

philosophy into reality." Bill Clinton, who is already a family friend to Dr. Yunus, observed in his autobiography My Life that "Muhammad Yunus should have received Nobel Prize few years earlier."

Prior to the Nobel Peace Prize he received many more national and international awards. It is a big list and certainly very very enviable. November 5 the President and the Head of the Caretaker Government Prof Ijazuddin Ahmed gave a reception to Dr. Muhammad Yunus in Bangabhaban on behalf of the whole nation. One certainly feels saying: Hail Professor Muhammad Yunus, the great son of the soil, the God-sent saviour of the poor and the deprived! The nation salutes you in pride and reverence.

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OPINION

Credit, discredit and micro-credit

KAZI ALAUDDIN AHMED

BRITISH novelist and poet Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) looked at credit this way: "Credit is like a looking-glass, which, when once sullied by a breath, may be wiped clear again; but if once cracked can never be repaired". In financial term 'credit' is a synonym for 'loan'. By implication it relates also to the individual or organisational credibility of the borrower or the beneficiary of the credit. And when in default due to failure to fulfil the terms of repayment, the borrower turns into a defaulter. The debtor receiving the credit stands discredited till such time he can retrieve his earlier status effectively in terms of the contract with the creditor.

Away from the financial transactions the word 'credit' in social interaction, either between indivi-

iduals or between organisations and individuals, wears a greater perspective. Someone given credit for his merit of performance in matters of overall social importance is apt to be hailed by his fellow men and women -- the ultimate beneficiary of the good deed felicitated or given credit. This is a very common and natural phenomenon in any civilised society. Taking credit is yet another queer obsession with many who are, by nature, very prone to self-adulation. This type of people do not, however, get universal appreciation and are often derided, if not openly, at least behind the scene. Between these two specific types there is yet another unassuming type who are genuinely averse to credit-inflation. These selfless people are few and far between. In fact, they are the ones who are most radiant stars in the distant firmament

and in times of need of a nation they outshine all others. They are the silent workers dedicating their lives to build the destiny of the nation they belong. They refuse to be pampered by the earthly inducement of 'credit'. Instead they seek divine blessings to be able to deploy fullest strength, physical, mental and intellectual, towards salvaging the suffering humanity.

The word 'discredit', on the other hand, is out and out a negative handle used freely by some people who are, by nature, averse to giving credit to others even though they (the credit-worthy ones) are genuinely good achievers. This term applies to an otherwise respectable person in the society who, by a sudden departure from his usual behavioural pattern, does or says something as would discredit him. We come across yet another type of people

who are so very careless in their public utterance which comes as a boomerang on them instantly. An example readily at hand: A week before the 4-party alliance went out of power, the finance minister Saifur Rahman was heard telling his listeners in a meeting on October 20, 2006, sarcastically, "It is not correct to say that the country has been developed in consequence of two/three thousand taka micro credit and mobile phone given to pauper women. I do not believe that anybody can be rich if given a number of goats and ducks...."

Such an awfully uncouth and terribly offending remark came off from his lips when the whole nation at home and the world at large were in jubilation on the news of the Nobel Peace Prize award to Prof Muhammad Yunus. Such a coincidence was indeed very unfortunate, a direct asper-

sion to discredit the principles of micro-credit and its diehard protagonist, Nobel laureate, our pride Dr Yunus. If he was so very sceptical about the strength of micro-credit, why then, at his instance Tk 800.00 crore was invested by his government in the same sector? How could he release funds from the public exchequer to finance the 'goat policy' of his government? It was just ridiculous on his part to speak contemptuously alluding to the have-not women as "fakirmee". Anyway, from that we have had a round about admission of failure of his government in real development of the country.

Micro-credit, the brain child of Professor Muhammad Yunus has been universally acknowledged and acclaimed as a most innovative and 99 percent successful intervention for poverty alleviation. Even though some one at

home may not be wholly convinced, but the world community at large has no illusion about the miracle created by the micro-credit programme. It is now being very rapidly replicated in many European countries besides the richest country of the world the United States of America. China, Japan, Russia, South Korea are also among others at the moment who have evinced keen interest in the micro-credit programme of Dr. Yunus. People's Republic of China, Japan and South Korea have already given him public felicitation at the respective government level in their capital cities.

Besides, many leading personalities of the world have made instant comments on news of Nobel Peace prize award to Professor Muhammad Yunus. Former US President Jimmy Carter observed: "Dr. Yunus has

afforded opportunity to the poor to build their own destiny. The price of this gift from him is far more than providing one single meal a day." The outgoing Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan remarked: "The micro-credit programme of Yunus has proved its effectiveness in enabling the low-income population break through the invidious circle of poverty and move forward to prosperity."

Former first Lady of USA Hilary Clinton remarked: "The poor people of the whole world are today traversing ahead in the path of a brighter and more elevated future through micro-credit. Dr. Yunus is the great visionary of such an enlightened future."

And the citation of the Norwegian Nobel Peace Prize committee reads: "Dr. Yunus has proved himself as such a leader who is capable of transforming