

Khaleda's misplaced priorities

Parties first, not election schedule

FORMER prime minister and BNP chief Begum Khaleda Zia has asked the Election Commission to announce the election schedule without taking into consideration which parties are going to participate in it.

Her exhortation needs to be analysed in the light of today's political reality and the situation that may arise if some major parties boycott the election. The BNP chairperson seems to be oblivious of what happened in 1996 when her party's election victory was very short-lived and counter-productive. The more recent example is of Thailand, where opposition-boycotted election had to be cancelled. If we want to maintain even a semblance of democracy, the participation of all major parties in the election is needed more than anything else. And any attempt to create the conditions where a party may remain out of the fray will be interpreted as a gross deviation from democratic practices.

While exchanging views with the leaders of a professional group, the former prime minister resorted to utterances that, we believe, will do little to lessen political tension created between the two major alliances. She advised the caretaker government to concentrate on assisting the EC to announce the election schedule. Should we, then, have to surmise that the caretaker government must completely overlook the political developments that are undermining the democratic process itself? Doesn't it shoulder the responsibility of holding not only a free and fair election but also a meaningful one? The election is not a ritual, rather it is the only vehicle for continuing our journey along the democratic path. And the journey is bound to be perilous if some important co-travellers are left behind.

Begum Khaleda Zia has demanded that the caretaker government perform only the routine jobs (that, too, determined by her). It will further push CG towards controversy. She has apparently forgotten that her party was a great beneficiary of the steps taken by the caretaker government in 2001. Then why does she want it to play a benignly passive role this time around?

Well, the immediate past government and the opposition are likely to have diametrically opposite views on the functioning of the caretaker government. But they cannot expect the interim administration to behave differently when their roles are reversed after five years.

Shooting at election commissioner's house

We condemn such odious behaviour

WE strongly condemn the odious attack on the residential quarters of Election Commissioner Mahmud Hasan Mansur. The incident took place in the early hours of Thursday in city's Mohammadpur area when a group of armed men came in a microbus and opened fire on the house. It is good luck that no one was injured in the shooting incident.

Such premeditated attack on important people in administration only reinforces our conviction that vested quarters are working from behind the scene to make holding of the forthcoming election a daunting task. In this particular shooting incident we see reflection of the widespread apprehension that vested quarters have already unleashed armed cadres to destabilise the country so that they may achieve their goals.

We strongly believe that the ongoing effort of the caretaker government advisers to resolve the crisis has to be supported by all concerned, as country's future hinges on their success. Already we have had hints of some positive outcome following the talks between the advisers and the political party leaders. There should be no stopping at this point. We would request all the political parties to cooperate fully with the advisers to reach a political solution and pave the way for a free and fair election. They have to remain alert and ask their workers and supporters to show utmost restraint and tolerance in the face of provocations. There are possibilities that agent provocateurs would take all measures to sabotage the election so that the nation sinks in an abyss of chaos and anarchy.

We have an uncomfortable feeling that this shooting incident is just a calling card of bigger incidences of law and order being planned for the future. Therefore, we urge the authorities concerned to launch a vigorous and immediate investigation to get to the bottom of the mystery and bring the culprits before the law of the land.

CEC -- loyalty incarnate!

KAZI ALAUDDIN AHMED

FTER a couple of months spent over the utterly intransigent dialogue proposition between the two opposing sides, the President Prof Dr Iazuddin Ahmed assumed himself a double role. It is a peculiar situation he has put himself in. All his acts and words as the head of the caretaker government will have to be subject to closer scrutiny of himself again when he acts as President.

As the head of the state it is of course constitutionally binding upon him to intervene in any administrative crisis. Subsequent to former Chief Justice KM Hasan's declining to accept the office of the head of caretaker government, the widely acknowledged experts of constitution came up with a good number of options that could be adopted to offset the impending crisis. By and large their interpretations were uniform and the President had the liberty to select any one of them. But, to the utter surprise and consternation of the literal wizards in the area, who are even internationally acclaimed as such, the President turned to the Attorney General for advice. Such a conjecture on his part strangely coincided with the inner mind of the leaders of the outgoing

BNP-led 4-party government. The whole process had been abrupt as much as that the President couldn't afford himself time for a second thought.

It is perhaps needless to reiterate, in this connection, the invincible 'loyalty' factor that compelled the President to take such a hasty decision. In fact, KM Hasan's shadow was yet to disappear from the national scenario when Prof. Iazuddin Ahmed, essentially a BNP beneficiary, took over the concurrent responsibility of the Chief Adviser of the caretaker government.

Even though the Awami League led 14-party alliance claimed to have earned a moral victory as a result of Justice KM Hasan's stepping aside, Iazuddin Ahmed's stepping in could have reverted the country back to square one. But it didn't happen so. Awami League led alliance opted for a conditional acceptance of the changed situation. The President-cum-head of the caretaker government was given time to prove his neutrality. However, the time being insufficient, upon request from the other end, it was extended to November 11 instead. The President and head of the caretaker government was also forewarned to show his absolute neutrality through fulfilling their 11-

Winds of change in the United States



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

rejected the portrayal of Iraq as a threat to America.

It would however probably be an over-simplification to suggest that this electoral humbling of the Republicans was also a vote against the manner in which the US Administration has been running its war on terror in general. I believe that the focus was more on growing anxiety about the continuing war in Iraq and Afghanistan. The people in general, by a majority indicated that they want the Iraqi expedition to

advocated splitting Iraq into autonomous units.

The Republicans have also been hesitant to clarify what basic changes in policy can be undertaken. Bipartisan sound bites have not emerged as yet. The Democrats under the leadership of Nancy Pelosi might not cut off cash for the war as Democrats did over Vietnam, but they are still not sure about possible alternatives on how to change the current course of US foreign policy.

Many are asking if the US's changing vision of its own government will affect not only its foreign policy but also its domestic emphasis. This has assumed significance because one of the contradictions of the Bush presidency has been its promotion of democracy abroad and the introduction of severe constitutional curbs at home. The election has demonstrated that the US is deeply divided about how it believes it should be governed.

The electoral shift has dramati-

ing and endorsing legislation, from foreign relations to budget panels. This will empower them to set the legislative agenda. They can still be confronted with the Presidential veto but their enhanced power could ensure legislative stale-

mates. Democrats will now have nine new Senators on their side of the aisle as a result of the balloting. Six of them defeated sitting Republican Senators from Pennsylvania, Ohio, Missouri, Rhode Island, Montana

and 39.7 percent in 2002.

Another interesting aspect to have emerged from the election was the fact that Asian Americans can run for Office and win. Bobby Jindal became the first Indian American in 2004 to enter the House of Representatives. Despite being a Republican, he has withheld the Democratic tide, retained his seat, and will now have many legislators of Asian origin to keep him company – several of them having Japanese and Chinese roots.

One cannot conclude about the post-election after-effects without also referring to free trade becoming an election casualty. It now seems unlikely that the new Congress will extend President Bush's fast track trade negotiating authority, which expires soon. This will mean bad news for the Doha Round.

The wind of change that has blown through the USA in the form of this mid-term election has opened many windows. Around Nancy Pelosi has emerged an array of plausible Democrats with their eye on 2008. Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, a reborn Al Gore and many other Democrats in the Senate are now hinting that they are considering the option of Presidential nomination. All of them are taking special interest after a CNN poll not only identified certain issues as having 'swing' potential for voters -- Iraq, terrorism, the economy and corruption -- but also that the Republicans were scoring badly in all of them.

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POST BREAKFAST

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end under a clearly supervised time-table.

It is now generally agreed that the arrival of Robert Gates at the Pentagon has been a victory for the 'realist' anti-war posture associated with certain officials from the Administration of Bush Senior -- Brent Snowcroft and James Baker. It is also being speculated that he has been brought in to salvage some dignity for the United States from the jaws of defeat.'

The future ahead for Gates will not be very easy. It will be complex. The prospective scenario will demand clear direction.

Unfortunately, the Democrats do not appear to have a disengagement plan in this regard. Till today, the Democrats have not agreed on a common stance on the Iraq war except to uniformly oppose Bush's strategy. Some of their leaders have wanted a quick withdrawal, some have wanted a timetable for this purpose and others have

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The Democrats have always taken interest about the Middle East road-map and Palestine. They have usually been bi-partisan in protecting the interests of Israel, but have also sometimes acknowledged that Palestine deserves a better deal. They do not however appear to have transparent views regarding Iran and Syria. Will they now support or recognise the need to open communications with Syria and Iran to get out of the imbroglio of Iraq? Hard choices have to be made by both sides.

It would be important to observe here that another question has emerged after the electoral results. Gates will have to handle many hard questions. It will also include the value of talking to Iran and Syria. Till now, the US Administration has regarded such contact as a reward, not a tool of diplomacy. The question is whether this approach will continue after the latest elections.

The Democrats being in control of Congress mean that for the first time in many years they will have the authority to hold hearings and investigations (e.g. surveillance of terrorist suspects without court warrants) and be able to issue subpoenas compelling witnesses to testify, potentially embarrassing to the White House. Democrats will also take over the powerful Committees charged with review-

and Virginia. The other three replaced retiring Senators from Maryland, Minnesota and Vermont. Their ideologies are as varied as their home States. Aside from gains in Congress, Democrats also took 20 of 36 Governor's races to give them a majority of top State jobs -- for the first time in a dozen years. New York, Ohio, Massachusetts, Colorado, Maryland and Arkansas went into the Democratic column. In other ballot races, Democrats also gained a decisive edge in State Legislatures, taking control of a number of bodies and solidifying their hold on others.

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pomp and circumstance of the swearing-in ceremony forced the people, and even the Awami League, to a numbed acquiescence.

Hindsight suggests that President Iazuddin's action of taking on the double role of a partisan President and a non-partisan Chief Adviser was part of a masterfully scripted play, brilliantly choreographed by some home-grown Machiavelli. The CEC plays no small part in this drama. As the President was being sworn in, the smiling faces of BNP and Jamaat stalwarts indicated how much they were enjoying their parting shot against the opposition. BNP's political *tour de force* was indeed very impressive.

However, the drama is yet to be played out in its entirety. The only thing that is certain is the uncertainty of its outcome. As I write this, the 14-party alliance has called off its 4-day siege giving the caretaker administration another four days for more talks. Much depends on whether the President/Chief Adviser can wriggle out of this straitjacket and emerge as the good man of Bangladesh, strong, non-partisan and decisive, and truly deserve the A+ that Dr Yunus had given him in advance. Much depends on whether the CEC, the redoubtable Mr Aziz, really wants to go down as one of the most hated men in Bangladesh's political history.

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The good man of Bangladesh?

SHAWKAT HUSSAIN

HERE are times when it is possible to perform multiple roles with efficiency, and there are times when it is not. It is now becoming increasingly clear that President Professor Dr Iazuddin and Chief Adviser Iazuddin can neither combine the different functions of the two roles, nor can he separate the two functions effectively as he is sworn to do. Being partisan President and non-partisan Chief Adviser seem to be mutually incompatible roles. Something's going to crack: it's a toss up whether it will be the nation or the man himself. Or maybe something else, quite unexpected, will emerge from the crack.

Living through these absurd days, I am reminded of Brecht's well-known play *The Good Woman of Setzuan* in which the situation is somewhat analogous to that in which the President, and the Chief Adviser of the Caretaker Government now finds himself. There is a "good" woman, Shui Ta, who starts a tobacco factory with money gifted to her by the gods. She realises that it is impossible to be both "good" and "successful" in a society surrounded by greedy, rapacious and lying people. In the same way, it is becoming obvious that it is impossible to be both a partisan President and a non-partisan Chief of the interim government. Shui Ta hits upon a dramatic solution to the conundrum of her situation: the need to be good and the need to survive financially. The "good" woman, Shui Ta, disappears

from the scene, and reappears in the guise of a man, Shen Te, who runs the tobacco factory with enormous success. What solution does Professor Dr Iazuddin have? Will he give precedence to his role as President or to his role as the Chief Adviser? It is clear that the twain cannot meet.

It would be excellent if the President with his retinue of partisan subordinates could disappear and the new Chief Adviser of Caretaker Government – the same person in reality – could emerge magically from the wings to shoulder the responsibilities of steering the nation to an acceptable national election. But that is wishful thinking I'm afraid. There are no signs that the partisan President will disappear and a non-partisan Chief Adviser will take charge. The illusion of appearance and disappearance that is so effectively achievable upon the theatrical stage has assumed ominous dimensions in the arena of national politics, the function of the Chief Adviser being subsumed by that of the President. What we are witnessing in fact is the disappearance of the Chief Adviser, sworn to act neutrally with

his council of advisers, from centre stage. Most decisions and actions seem to emanate from a shadowy area behind the Presidential curtain.

This has become evident in a number of recent actions of the government: the declaration that we in fact have a presidential form of government, later retracted when the blatant unconstitutionality of the statement became too difficult to defend; the order from Home Secretary, acting on the President's order, to deploy the army to enforce law and order, again retracted when there was a chorus of protest, not the least from Council of Advisers who knew nothing about it; the elevation of the President's Press Secretary to the rank and status of a State Minister and Adviser to the President; the President's refusal to meet a delegation of the Dhaka University Teachers' Association, a body of which he was himself the President, and to which he owes no small extent, his current exalted and controversial status. And most importantly, the CG's failure, so far, to come up with a mechanism to remove the CEC.

The conclusion is unavoidable:

that this is the most ineffectual Caretaker Government that we have had so far, and for no fault of the advisers themselves. They might have good intentions (and it is clear that some of them do), they can look self-important in their sleek, shiny black cars, speeding back and forth between this Alliance and that Jote, they can mouth well-meaning platitudes about how things are going ahead, but the common perception is that they are no more than toothless agents of an unseen machinery bigger and more powerful than their combined efficiency, experience and wisdom. Or shall they somehow rise in unison, manfully shoulder their responsibilities, and accomplish what their predecessors did?

The last three Caretaker Governments did manage to deliver to the nation, criticisms and controversies notwithstanding, three acceptable elections won first by BNP in 1991, by AL in 1996, and then the last by BNP again in 2001. They had a clear mandate and they set out successfully to fulfil that mandate. That is all we want now – a level playing field that will enable the people to elect the next government of their choice, be it Awami

League, BNP, Jamaat-i-Islam or LDP or any other party. All parties, except the 4-party Jote, believe that the creation of this level-playing field is not possible under a partisan President who is not seen to be doing enough to remove an equally partisan CEC.

There was a brief moment of relief when the BNP government finally came to an end in October. Then after a day or so of protests, violence, and uncertainty, there was another moment of euphoria when Justice KM Hasan expressed his reluctance to join as the Chief of the Caretaker Government. The stage seemed to be set for three months of non-partisan rule. Finally, in a dramatic reversal of expectations, President Iazuddin shocked the nation, and stunned the Awami League into two hours of uncharacteristic silence, by stepping into the neutral role of the Chief Adviser himself. According to most experts of the Constitution (except the Dean of the Faculty of Law whose expertise is now seriously in question), the custodian of the Constitution had himself flouted the constitutional process for the nomination of the Chief Adviser. The

context we very pertinently allude to the commentary of the editor of Prothom Alo in his paper on November 08 where the CEC was straightaway charged with lying on the reported visit of an Adviser of the caretaker government at CEC's office. The Adviser himself told the news media that he visited the CEC along with the Military Secretary of the President. The CEC was requested by the press to give his comments on Lt. Gen (retd.) Hassan Masud Chowdhury's statement. Visibly annoyed and wearing a pallid look he replied "I detest hearing the same question repeatedly." Yes, he should. Because he had no way out but to compound the crisis.

BNP chairperson is fond of claiming in public meetings quite often that her party is the biggest in the country. She also adds that her party enjoys full support of the majority population who, she hopes, will replicate their massive support given in 2001 election. If she really means it and believes in such a possibility why then she appears so very concerned about the demand of her adversaries for removal of CEC Aziz and his commissioners. This and many other relevant questions can be asked. In

whatever could have been the intention, the statement as such has been taken for infringement of the provisions in the constitution.

In any case, the situation continues to be highly volatile and uncertain. If the President and Chief Adviser of the caretaker government doesn't prove his neutrality as per his oath of office and constitution, the 14-party alliance would have no other choice but to resume the siege. This time it is fraught with terrible apprehensions of fierce battle between 14-party alliance and BNP-led 4-party alliance. The latter announced that they too would be on the street.

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point demand by that time. Else, the 14-party alliance would resume its temporarily suspended siege programme from November 12.

Meantime, support to the 11-point demand largely widened. Removal of the chief election commissioner along with the other three election commissioners, reform of the election commission and of the whole administration infested by BNP-Jamaat incumbents, etc. were the major issues in the 11-point demand. Though there has been some transfer of government officers here and there in the name of reshuffle it is yet to satisfy the demands of the 14-party alliance and as such dismissed as mere eye wash. On the most pressing issue of CEC's removal a news item was circulated that the advisers of the caretaker government arrived at a consensus that the CEC would be requested to vacate to show respect to the popular demand. At such a critical juncture BNP chairperson advised the President and head of the caretaker government

wanted the President to exercise his sense of judgment and fair play. Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina expressed her dissatisfaction with the virtual inaction on the part of the President. She insisted conclusively that she and her alliance would watch the steps to be taken by the caretaker government. If they continue to be unsatisfactory the 14-party alliance would resume the hitherto suspended blockade programme across the country. It would all depend on the action desired in the 11-point demand, to be taken by the President. However, the present turmoil is expected to subside substantially if the stubborn CEC MA Aziz steps down. It may be recalled in this particular context that Justice KM Hasan's indecision for long aggravated the fracas and by the time he succumbed to the pricks of his conscience, there was a toll of 25 lives across the country in bloody battles on the streets. Justice Aziz, it is hoped would no longer bide time and push the