

## CEC's meeting with high-level advisers' delegation

*Next course of action must follow soon*

WE are glad that the high-level delegation of the council of advisers had met the CEC yesterday. We can assume that the purpose of the meeting was to ask the CEC to leave, as was done not very long ago. However, till going to press we are not aware of the outcome of that meeting or for that matter of the meeting of the delegation with the Chief Adviser. We are not aware of what action he will take in solving the major issue that stands in the way of an acceptable election. But certainly some definitive action must come forth from the Chief Adviser and the President very soon.

We agree that on the one hand a constitutional post cannot be violated but on the other hand, we must bring to bear the majesty of the presidency, the dignity of the caretaker government, and the supremacy of the need to hold a free and fair election on the CEC

All these must weigh on the CEC in his decision to continue in office. Even a blind person can see the writing on the wall which points out without any ambiguity to the only solution, his exit, which he has still time to make honourably.

We would certainly not like our national politics to be guided by international opinion; we cannot also overlook the sentiments of our foreign friends. The unambiguous statement of the European parliament, and yesterday's direct comment of the US Ambassador are cases in point.

We are constrained to ask the BNP the rationale behind their stand in favour of the CEC. What is the principal on which they argue that he cannot be made to leave? We very well understand the constraints of constitutional provisions, but his resignation will not be outside the stipulations of the constitution. And such a move is not without precedence of which the BNP has been a part. Our plea to the BNP would be to shun the obstinate stance and help tide over the problem.

As for the caretaker government it has yet another issue to address, that being a part of its constitutional obligation to help the EC to organise a flawless election, which is to ensure that it is conducted on the basis of a flawless voter list.

## Advisers doing a credible job

*CA must encourage them further, not bypass them*

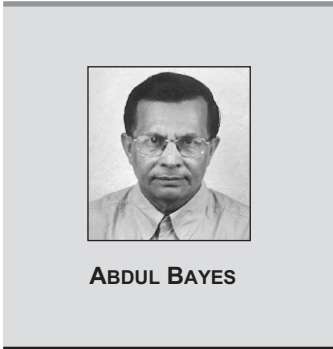
THE advisers to the Caretaker Government (CG) are visibly and justifiably not happy with the progress in resolving the ongoing political crisis. Obviously, the political situation is a matter of great concern. Also, there is the question of how effective the advisers themselves have been.

In spite of the lack of effectiveness, we greatly appreciate the efforts that the advisers are making to ensure that the caretaker government delivers what people expect of it - resolution of the political impasse and paving the way for a free and fair election. But at the same time we have to express our dismay at the lack of support from the Chief Adviser to the team of advisers. It has so far been anything but total teamwork on the part of the CG. The Chief Adviser has, reports indicate, bypassed the advisers while taking important decisions, though the advisers are actually his main source of strength.

Nevertheless, the advisers are trying their best and have been able to create the impression that they are absolutely neutral, though their nominations came from the political parties. That's no mean achievement, particularly when highly partisan and parochial politics is undermining the very foundation of our democracy. Their performance has actually reinforced our faith in their ability to rise to the occasion and address the tricky political issues dispassionately.

They should remain focused on their job and feel encouraged by the fact that the whole nation is solidly behind them. They have to complete their mission upon which hinges the political future of the country.

The Chief Adviser, for his part, should do everything to encourage so that he can get the most fruitful and effective services of the advisers. He has to create the right kind of ambience for the CG to function efficiently. To this end, he should make the Chief Adviser's office the focal point of all activities, not the Bangabhaban. It is his position as the Chief Adviser to the CG that he derives his authority to become the arbiter of the nation's political dispute at the moment.



ABDUL BAYES

THE electronic media reported the disheartening idea of appointing two additional commissioners in EC to face the current conundrums. The president and caretaker chief is reported have disclosed this option to Begum Kaleda Zia and her entourage while in Bongabhaban the day before yesterday.

We were perturbed to know that this was disclosed to a particular political party -- widely known as the party to which the president belongs -- while keeping others in the dark. Second, we were equally annoyed to know that the report of the advisory committee was not taken into due consideration. That means, seemingly, all arrangements are set to initiate an election, keeping the Aziz-Zakaria axis in the cockpit of the EC. Quite obviously, the major opposition political parties are not

going to accept that and the blockade is going to continue from November 20.

That the EC is the villain of the piece is now suggested not only by the opposition but also by the development partners. The British high commissioner indicated to that by arguing that the whole process of election must ignite confidence among the participating parties. The American ambassador emphatically expressed that the issue of overhauling EC is key. Both of them are diplomats and for diplomats signs carry substantial substance. The EU parliament came out with a written document expressing the fear of an acceptable election under the present EC and its manufactured voter list.

Frustrations also appear to

loom large among the advisors of the caretaker government, as reflected by their faces. It is not surprising, given the fact that they are not being trusted nor being allowed to exercise their constitutional obligation. However, the advisors, most of them having a stellar professional career and having been working without fear and favour, still continue to try their best to convince the hon'ble president that he should look before he leaps. While the previous three caretaker governments performed their duties with people's confidence and under the spirit of a team, the present caretaker government is being portrayed as a one-man show, keeping the advisors as show pieces only.

Meantime, after sufficient time given to the caretaker chief

for displaying neutrality and sensing no sign of improvement, the 14-party alliance is imposing the blockade from November 20. That means the whole nation will be placed under siege for possibly an indefinite period.

The economy has already been reeling under tremendous pressures: exports going down, import costs rising, and domestic resource mobilization dropping. BGMEA has rightly recorded their resentments and are requesting the president for a solution within 12 hours. Progress in the educational institutions are being interrupted causing serious academic jam. Prices of essentials are soaring following disruptions in communications.

All that social, economic, and political downturns could be

adduced to one issue: reconstitution of EC and updating the voter list. We fail to understand why the whole nation should suffer for Aziz et al and their activities. The majority of political parties -- excepting BNP and Jamat -- have clearly expressed their choice of overhauling EC. Various polls in newspapers and electronic media also suggest for a resignation of the CEC and an overhaul of the EC. Unfortunately, none of the messages seem to reach the caretaker chief who has, from the very beginning, chosen the path of buying time. We strongly feel that buying time deliberately is not going to heal the wounds, rather, it may ignite further fire under which all of us, including the hon'ble president, might burn.

Before this write-up goes to press, Professor Iajuddin might have addressed the nation, hopefully, with a solution. But the solution that he reportedly proposed to BNP-Jamat leaders does not appear to augur well at the current political crossroads. But if the address to the nation is delayed, we would request him to save the nation that is paying heavily.

Just for one person, a nation should not bleed. He should immediately ask CEC Aziz et al. to drop out from business and

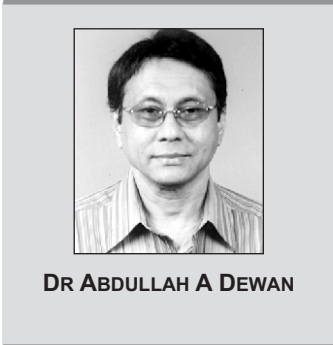
allow a new team to take the nation to a neutral election. Anything short of that could help an election to take place, but the cost of that would be insurmountable. Constitution is for the people. The removal of HM Ershad and the assumption of power by Justice Shahabuddin was also "unconstitutional" in one sense. But people rose to their feet to see a change. It is also a time now when people rise to their feet to see change in EC and we shall have to devise a way for that.

But, as constitutional experts tend to argue, even within constitutional means, the president of the country can remove Aziz et al. We are told that the president is not willing to exercise that power, possibly, provoked by the party to which he belongs. We still pin hopes on him and expect all his powers be applied to save the nation from woe.

To reiterate, the president may look for place in the pages of history by displaying a neutral appearance or in the dustbin of history by helping his own political party to win under an arranged election. But people will not accept such arrangement. All should not be set to start a fire.

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## Mother of the present crisis



DR ABDULLAH A DEWAN

DOESN'T it look asinine that the party that contrived to install its partisan president as chief advisor to the CTG is now protesting on the street and crying wolf against the opposition's legitimate demand for electoral reforms?

Just the other day, Mannan Bhuiyan said that it would take years, not three months, for the CTG to implement the AL-led alliance's 11 points electoral reforms. He further said: "Awami League has raised the demands at a time when people are ready for free and fair elections." These statements are unabashed demagoguery -- born out of either his hypocrisy or memory lapse.

Khaleda Zia, who over the last two years feverishly dismissed the AL reform proposals as self-serving and meritless, could have promoted the institutions of democracy, instead were affianced in an all out scheme to politicize the civil and police administration, including the EC and all its operatives in order to harvest political advantage in the ensuing election. Her rule has surpassed any other government in the subcontinent's history in

terms of corruption, politicization, black money laundering, and loan defaulting. The police brutalities she unleashed against oppositions are rivaled only by the struggle for democracy against Pakistani military juntas.

Who would have thought that one day our own politicians would use our own police force to kill our own people for demanding electoral reforms for a free and fair election (FAFE)? The opposition is only asking for a level political milieu for all political actors, but Khaleda has kept castigating their demands.

Before transferring power, the BNP left no machinations unscathed -- the worst of which was the politicization of most government departments via the implantation of their lackeys as deep as three layers of administrative heads. The design was to ensure that in the event the incoming CTG reshuffles the top brass, there would be others waiting serially to serve the partisan interest.

Khaleda gives an impression: "You are either with us (neutral) or you are conspirators (non-neutral)." She acts and talks as if BNP is still in power and that she can return to the PMO as she

## NO NONSENSE

**People will trust the CTG chief and support him unreservedly once he displays his neutrality. He must realize that he is no longer BNP's discretionary president. He must believe that he has the rare opportunity to occupy a place in his nation's history second only to Bangabandhu. But can he deliver the goods? Does he have the guts to defy his party's dictates and act in the interest of his country and for all his people?**

pleases. She seems oblivious of the fact that it is her machinations that have created so much muddle and mishmash for the country, and that unless these problems are purged, her return to power without AL's participation will be considered illegitimate. But does she care?

No fair-minded person would consider the AL's 11 points demand as "conspiratory" and self-serving. The BNP's rejection of them is driven by the concern that an equal opportunity election will render their vote rigging implants as unrewarding. BNP would thus like to hold the election as soon as possible; if not today, then certainly before the 11 point proposal is implemented.

This is revealed in her November 15 words in a view-exchange meeting at the Diploma Engineers Institute auditorium, in which she told the CTG: "You are talking too much while doing nothing. Your only duty now is to announce the schedule for the national polls. It's not the caretaker government's job to work out who to participate in the election and who not."

The heads of mission of the EU member-states conveyed the views of the EU on a wide range

of key electoral issues, specifically the issues that besmirched the election environment for a FAFE, namely, the flawed voter list, the bias of the state controlled media, the lack of transparency of the CTG, the absence of financial disclosure of candidates, the intimidation of minority and women voters, and the disposal of complaints and appeals and convening political dialogue.

The US ambassador Patricia Butenis has already been competing for headlines by calling on anyone that matters. Visiting US envoy Richard Boucher said in a press conference on November 11 that: "The situation here is difficult but the goal is a free and fair election. There are a lot of issues to be settled by the caretaker government that needs more time to set up the groundwork for a free, fair, peaceful and credible election."

Yes, time is of the essence. But more time is needed to do the job right. What is the point in holding an election just to meet the deadline in January 2007? The reinstallation of the corrupt and the wrongdoers will only guarantee business as usual. Besides, holding a patch-up election without the participation of the AL

would be a pigheaded misadventure.

The US and the EU already forewarned in February about the legitimacy issue, implying that if election is illegitimate, the government that will follow will also be illegitimate and will lack international recognition. FAFE ensures that losing candidates will accept the validity of the election's outcome and give legitimacy to the new government both at home and abroad.

The observation of some CTG advisors on November 12 that "the election will be incomplete and considered illegitimate both at home abroad without the participation of major political parties" is a good portent. In the same spirit, the CTG must not pass up the opportunity to cleanse the country of the scourge of the corrupt politicians and other wrong doers. Show me where in the constitution it forbids the CTG from catching the criminals. The president and his advisors must realize that they have the power to do what no other government had since Bangabandhu. Need more time to clean the mess? Then take it. But do not get too comfortable with unbridled power.

Empower the ACC to round up the allegedly corrupt politicians and keep them from participating in the ensuing election. Even a meager success in depoliticizing the election administration and netting some corrupt ministers and MPs will establish a precedent that will deter future parties in power from replicating BNP's scheming.

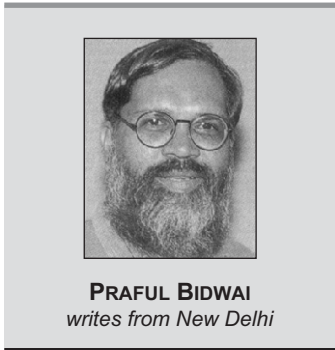
Many of us are grappling with a volley of "no nonsense" questions. Can there be a FAFE in January under the prevailing environment? How would any reconstituted EC guarantee a FAFE given the degree and depth of politicization? How would the EC account for a 10.3 million fake registered voters without updating? Can the election be postponed for a little longer to clean up BNP's mess?

If the people lose their trust and confidence in the political process and politicians of the country, and hopelessness besieges them, emergence of a new face to restore that trust becomes indispensable. Can President Ahmed be that leader? His holding of nearly a dozen important ministries, recent pronouncement of presidential form of governance (then taking it back), ordering for a countrywide deployment of the army (and then reversing it), are manifestations of either his impotence and incapacity or his desire to wield power as long as possible

People will trust the CTG chief and support him unreservedly once he displays his neutrality. He must realize that he is no longer BNP's discretionary president. He must believe that he has the rare opportunity to occupy a place in his nation's history second only to Bangabandhu. But can he deliver the goods? Does he have the guts to defy his party's dictates and act in the interest of his country and for all his people?

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## A setback to Bush and the neo-cons



PRAFUL BIDWAI  
writes from New Delhi

SO utterly obsessed is the Indian media with the nuclear deal with the United States that it has reduced its coverage of the Democrats' impressive capture of Congress solely to a discussion of its implications for the agreement's passage before the end of the year.

The Indian public thus risks missing the true domestic and global significance of the US mid-term elections, which represent a huge defeat for the Republican Party.

The Democrats' victory in both the House of Representatives and the Senate leaves George W Bush a lame-duck president mid-way through his second term.

**India's best bet lies in trying to exert sobering influence upon the US over its Iraq and Israel/Palestine policies. But to do so, India must jettison its present unbalanced approach of tailing the US and developing a skewed strategic alliance with Israel. Only thus can India contribute to making the world more balanced, multi-polar and less strife-torn. India must give up its narrow-minded obsession with riding the US piggyback to global greatness. It must reclaim its broad-horizon, independent and non-aligned foreign policy and promote the universal values of peace, justice and balance, not the cynical pursuit of power without purpose.**

The election turned into a referendum on Mr Bush's leadership. The American public resoundingly rejected him. It's an eloquent comment to Mr Bush's popularity that almost half the 58 candidates he campaigned for lost. Of the 18 candidates whom he visited more than once, only four won.

Important to the Republicans' defeat were their elitist domestic policies, their corruption, and the Iraq war. The Democrats campaigned for alternative policies on healthcare, education, minimum wages, and social security.

However, the public's reaction to the Iraq quagmire formed "the driving factor" or turning point in the election.

The Republicans obviously miscalculated the domestic unpopularity of Iraq's occupation, which has caused the death of 655,000 Iraqi civilians and almost 2,000 US soldiers.

The election results have wrecked the Republicans' plans to build a long-term Right-wing hegemony over the US through ultra-conservative pro-business domestic policies.

They have also loosened the stranglehold of the neo-conservatives over Washington's foreign and security policies. The "Project for a New American Century," which was meant to create a long-lived Roman-style Empire, has suffered a well-

deserved drubbing.

Especially humiliating for the neo-cons was the sacking of Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who was responsible for many policy blunders that led to Iraq's slide into civil conflict, bloodshed and chaos.

Mr Rumsfeld's replacement by former CIA director Robert Gates, a member of the "Iraq Study Group" headed by former Secretary of State James Baker, is expected to recommend a change of direction in Iraq.

Mr Baker is an old-styled Republican "realist," who believes in managing the world, not aggressively reshaping it through "regime change" in "Axis of Evil" states and

by spreading democracy.

The neo-cons' ascendancy under President Bush made for a particularly malign, militarized, and bellicose America.

The US walked out of numerous arms control agreements and intervened in different countries while citing all kinds of false excuses: destroying "weapons of mass destruction," "humanitarian intervention," or spreading democracy.

The US has only had limited success in Afghanistan. But the Islamophobic content of its "counter-terrorism" strategy has increased.

Mr Bush has made the world more discontented, turbulent and dangerous. It's thus extremely annoying to hear many Indian policy-makers say: "Bush may have been bad for the world, but he's good for India" -- as if India weren't part of the world or had shrunk its horizons so miserably as to be unconcerned at the global consequences of Bush's policies.

Such parochialism speaks poorly of India's claim to emergence as a world power. They reflect the pitiable mind-set of the Indian elite, which honours Mr

Bush with a 56 percent approval rating, in contrast to his under-40 percent rating in most Western countries.

What does the new political dispensation in Washington spell for Americans and for the larger world? Domestically, it's likely to promote less Right-wing and less slavishly pro-corporate policies with fewer tax breaks for the rich but with greater social spending.

This will hopefully sober down Washington's global advocacy of "free-market" dogma too.

The US Congress is also unlikely to extend Mr Bush's mandate to conclude the Doha Round of world trade talks. This will benefit the developing countries, which have much to lose from opening up their markets to the developed countries' manufactures and services.

Even more important are the likely possibilities that open up in West Asia, is the crucible in which global politics is being reshaped.

Several scenarios are possible for Iraq. First, the US withdraws in an orderly manner, leaving a credible democratic structure in place, with inter-ethnic reconciliation. Second, Washington parti-

tions Iraq into a Kurdish North, Sunni Centre, and a Shia South.

Or third, transitional authority is vested in a UN-led multilateral arrangement which paves the way for a truly independent democratic Iraq.

The first scenario is unlikely because it demands uncharacteristic wisdom, foresight and generosity on America's part. The second is a recipe for a historic catastrophe. A partitioned Iraq won't be at peace with itself or its neighbourhood. The region will bleed interminably. The US must be dissuaded from this course.

The third scenario won't happen unless many voices speak for it, including the UN, European Union, Russia, China, India, the Non-Aligned Movement and others.

However, bringing the right scenario into being will require policy independence, vision and imagination. These must also be applied to break the current Palestinian impasse -- a key to healthy change in West Asia.

The US must be made to abandon its strategy of supporting Zionism and Israel's cynical campaign to strangle the Palestinian

national liberation movement, massacre innocent people, and bully its neighbours.

This is a tall order, but the pressure of sane public opinion can and must be brought to bear upon the US -- in international forums, bilaterally, and through civil society anti-war mobilisations.

India's best bet lies in trying to exert sobering influence upon the US over its Iraq and Israel/Palestine policies. But to do so, India must jettison its present unbalanced approach of tailing the US and developing a skewed strategic alliance with Israel.

Only thus can India contribute to making the world more balanced, multi-polar and less strife-torn.

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Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.