

Khaleda's swipe against advisers

Isn't it unbecoming of her?

FOUR-party alliance leader and erstwhile prime minister Begum Khaleda Zia has taken umbrage at the advisers' talking to the media and some of them meeting AL chief Sheikh Hasina which to her constituted a breach of oath they had taken. She went hysterical with her invectives uttering too many things without any apparent connection, far less having any foundation in truth. Begum Zia literally accused the advisers of working to stop free and fair election, a very serious charge against them to countenance. Far worse, she didn't explain how they are stopping fair elections, just as she couldn't substantiate her allegation of them having broken their oath of office.

She drew a strange analogy between serving bureaucrats meeting at Mahmudur Rahman's business office and the two advisers meeting the AL leader, saying: "When advisers can secretly meet the leader of the opposition, what's wrong in bureaucrats meeting?" As a former prime minister, instead of discouraging secret activities of bureaucrats, she seems to endorse it. We recall that the two advisers met Sheikh Hasina, not on their own, mind you, but having been clearly sent by President Iajuddin as his emissaries to the AL chief.

The president by not making it public that the advisers went to meet Sheikh Hasina at his initiative, stood on the wrong side of the truth, even if unwittingly, so we would like to think.

As for the adviser's talking to the journalists as frequently as they did, they not only served the people's right to know but also brought to bear the pressure of transparency and urgency on the emergent issues of vital importance. It was a great service to recount, but they have only begun their job.

The sheer anger and utter illogic with which the former prime minister took an exception to the advisers' role seem to suggest that she is unhappy with them for not doing her bidding as she otherwise perhaps finds done by the chief adviser.

Arson on election offices

Punish the assaulters

In recent times there have been a number of arson attacks on several election offices in outlying districts. Offices at Barisal, Khulna, Jhenidah, Chuadanga and Brahmanbaria came under assault. As a result, valuable documents, office furniture and equipment were burnt. The Election Commission (EC) Secretariat has asked the home ministry for stepped up security arrangements for the protection of election offices and officials at district and upazila levels.

Needless to say that these incidence of arson has created panic amongst field level election officers. We are deeply concerned about these heinous acts. There are two sides to such incidents: first, they send wrong signals about the state of law and order under caretaker government. Second, as a fallout it may have a negative impact on the overall voters' turn-out and conduct of the entire electoral process. It has been rightly pointed out by a senior EC official that "It will be difficult for the local level officials to perform their duties if such incidents continue to take place".

We condemn such premeditated arson on the election offices. It should be understood by all concerned that no matter how strongly one may insist on a "correct" voter list and a "plain level field" for holding a credible election, such arson incidents may end up in making the entire election process vulnerable.

We, therefore, urge the caretaker government to take appropriate measures to stop recurrence of such incidents. Considering the nature of the arson it is our belief given the sincerity of purpose and commitment the matter can be effectively dealt with, particularly when the attacks don't appear to have been caused by any collective vandalism. These are some local goons that need to be sorted out thick and fast.

Take Back Bangladesh



ZAFAR SOBHAN

STRAIGHT TALK

THINGS do seem pretty bleak at first blush. It seems fairly apparent now that nothing is going to retrieve the political situation any time soon. Aziz is gone, but it is clear that free and fair elections are as unlikely as before. The decision to publish the election schedule last Monday signals that the caretaker government continues to do the 4-party alliance's bidding and also that those calling the shots don't much care about public opinion.

The game plan is obvious. Full steam to elections. It doesn't matter if the 14-party alliance contests or not. In fact, if not, all the better. If it does contest, that's fine, too: without meaningful election reform, the fix is already in. Hurriedly swear in a new cabinet and parliament. Brazen it out.

What is the 14-party alliance to do? It will hit the streets again on Sunday. No surprise there. What it hopes to achieve remains unclear. The erstwhile opposition has shown that it can force the caretaker government to ... what exactly? Make meaningless concessions that do not have any impact on the situation on the ground, if the evidence

available so far is any guide. We seem to be running out of options as the country braces itself for more unrest. Once again, the very real spectre of army intervention in some form or other cannot be totally ruled out.

Fortunately for the country, the armed forces have thus far shown admirable restraint and indicated that they are extremely reluctant to step in. This is as it should be and the army's evident reluctance to enter the fray is possibly one of the better pieces of news these days.

But if things continue to deteriorate, we will be all out of options. It is not a comforting thought.

Prof Yunus has once again stepped up to the plate with his new formula. As far as formulas go, it is not a bad one. In theory. However, the plan calls for a level of cooperation and compromise that has not been in evidence so far on the part of the two main political parties.

One is tempted to think that if they could cooperate and compromise in such a comprehensive manner, they would have

been able to find common ground on the far smaller issues that divide them today, and we wouldn't be in this mess in the first place.

After all, if BNP and AL can agree to clean up the Election Commission as part of a one-year coalition government, there is no reason that they couldn't achieve the same thing right now. In fact, to call a spade a spade, it is only the intransigence of the 4-party alliance right now that stands in the way of necessary reform, but this fact went unmentioned by the good professor.

Perhaps what the country needs to do is go even further. There are many reforms that need to be put in place for democracy to function better.

Certainly, reform of the EC and the presidency are key. But while we are on the subject, what about parliamentary reform, public procurement reform, and a right to information act? What about proportional representation? If we are talking comprehensive reform, let's put it all on the table.

Last year I wrote about the need for a constitutional conven-

tion to hash all this out. I anticipated the coming impasse and thought that if we were truly unable to find a path forward, then let us use the opportunity to take stock and really clean house.

So, in theory, I am all for these kinds of measures. They would be a good start. But in practice, I do not see how we could make it work, and that's always the problem in Bangladesh, isn't it? Putting good ideas into practice.

The question is how will the new formula be received, and whether it will gain traction, among the international community. This might be a something for them to latch on to. Let us see their response. It will be instructive. If the Yunus formula starts to show up as a viable talking point in the regular meetings between Ms Butenis and the two ex-prime ministers, then it might have some legs.

Meanwhile, despite the apparent bleakness, there are promising signs on the horizon. Young people, especially, are fed up with the current stalemate. They want nothing more than a free and fair election. For now, the

idea is that this is the bare minimum that they need and demand. It won't solve all their problems, but it is a start.

To this end, the general public wants reconstitution of the EC and a genuine voter roll. The current situation is unacceptable. By the same token, your average citizen disagrees with the politics of "oborodh."

Take Back Bangladesh would like to provide a platform for the millions of people in the country who are caught up in this no man's land, who can see clearly that the election is being set to be rigged, and are disgusted by this, but who are equally turned off by the blockade programs as well.

The idea behind Take Back Bangladesh is to reconnect the people, especially the younger generation, who are turned off by politics as usual and feel that their voices are never heard by the political parties.

The first step in this direction is a free concert today at 2:30. It may not be much more than a pleasant few hours in the sun, but I can't think of a better way to spend a Friday afternoon than listening to good music in a good cause and meeting other people who are thinking along the same lines.

It is interesting that in a country of 140 million plus, the nation essentially seems unable to break its way out of an impasse that is in fact the preference of only a handful of people.

So this is a good first step: a show of solidarity. It is to show that we are fed up with the status quo, to show that we, too, have a voice, and want that voice to be heard. All people of good will

who care about the future of Bangladesh and are frustrated by the current situation are invited to come. It promises to be an enjoyable and inspiring afternoon. If nothing else, listening to artists such as Black or Bappa Majumdar or any of the rest of the star-studded line-up is always worthwhile.

Where will the movement go? It is too soon to tell. But the main thing is that Bangladeshis need to get up off the side-lines and insist on making themselves heard. Things may look dire right now, but there is hope on the horizon.

That hope is the long-suffering people of Bangladesh who have worked so hard and achieved so much in the face of so much hardship. There is so much promise and potential in this country, if only we could unite and harness that great reservoir of talent and ability, rather than continue to stifle it or ignore it or suppress it.

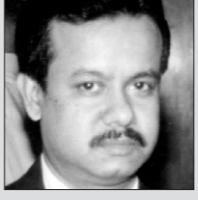
That's what the concert is all about. Rekindling that hope. Because the first step is that we need to believe that we can make a difference. Only once we believe this can we actually take that next step and do so. One step at a time.

[Full disclosure: I am involved with Take Back Bangladesh and one of the organizers of the event.]

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The concert is today, from 2:30 to sundown at the Robindro Shorobor open air amphitheatre, Road no. 7, Dhanmondi (close to the bridge).

People are like water



MUHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

CROSS TALK

Right now the people are stagnant, angry and anguished, fuming and fretting over their misfortune in the political turmoil which doesn't have any consideration for them. Do they really need to produce the sparks? What they need to do is to produce currents so that they can bring the spate to wash away everything that stands in their way. That includes barricades, politicians, musclemen, anybody and everybody who doesn't believe that people can do what they can.

flared up.

Perhaps people can be compared to damp firewood that takes time to regain the tinder which catches on fire. The average people have many worries, their daily lives soaked in the sweat of struggles to put food on the table. Their minds are pre-occupied, and their bodies are broken under the crushing burden of drudgery from dawn to dusk. The irony of democracy is that it is a government of, by and for those who sometimes don't give it a damn.

Modern history records three great revolutions -- the French Revolution (1789), the Russian Revolution (1917), and the American Revolution (1776). And what were the outcomes of these revolutions when each of them took countless lives? The Russian Revolution produced a country named the Soviet Union, which no longer exists, and a political philosophy named communism, which has lost its appeal. The French Revolution produced a

government that self-destructed five years after it was born, and resulted in the re-establishment of the monarchy it originally overthrew. The American Revolution created a nation, government and political philosophy that still hold sway over the minds of freedom-loving people.

So, why such different outcomes when all three revolutions rode on the waves of mass upheaval? One can find more than one answer to this question. In both the French and Russian revolutions, for example, fiery radicals fought to wrest power from a sovereign ruler, while in the American Revolution conservative property owners, many of them lawyers, fought to retain powers they had previously wielded as self-governing Englishmen.

Equality and fraternity were the rallying forces of the French Revolution, while in Russia the revolution's underlying premise was a "classless" society in which

all people were the same, regardless of their abilities or ambitions. In America, the revolutionary "Declaration" said that everyone was "created equal" in terms of opportunity, but from then on their futures would vary, depending on their varied abilities, industriousness and capacity for hard work. Upward mobility was to be encouraged, but not guaranteed, in America. In revolutionary France and Russia, human rights were granted by the state. In America, rights were -- and are -- something individuals are "endowed with" at birth by their "Creator," and, therefore, the state could never take them away.

But, when tested, most of these ideological precepts failed to work in the common man's life.

In revolutionary France there was no provision for cultural diversity, but in revolutionary Russia a polyglot of mostly incompatible ethnic groups were forced under one roof through state power. Only in America did culturally diverse

peoples willingly jump into a

"melting pot."

The purpose of reviewing revolutionary history is not to sing praise for the Americans, but to bring home the point that the form of government which lasted most is the one that had most consideration for the people. In other words, it is not enough for democracy to do politics in the name of people unless profound respect for people is ingrained in that politics. It's a different issue that the Americans don't have respect for other people. But they surely have lot of respect for their own.

So, it is now time to ask, where are the people? If sieges are laid, and barricades are raised, then they are the ones who pay the price. Their lives are disrupted, livelihood is diminished, and they face the humiliation, the hassle, the fear and anxiety of traveling back and forth between work and home through murderous mobs. Where are these people who stand in the sun, run in the rain, get crumbs of the pleasure but slices of the pain? Where are they who miss the bus, get thrown out of the train, hit by stray bullets, hurt by splinters; the silent lambs who are sacrificed on the altar of power by the cult worshippers of political gains?

Right now the people are stagnate, angry and anguished, fuming and fretting over their misfortune in the political turmoil which doesn't have any consideration for them. Do they really need to produce the sparks? What they need to do is to produce currents so that they can bring the spate to wash away everything that stands in their way. That includes barricades, politicians, musclemen, anybody and everybody who doesn't believe that people can do what they can.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

Is fair, free and credible election possible?

The feeble steps of the chief adviser of CTG cannot assure us of a free, fair and credible election, unless the 4-party alliance agrees to contest on a level field, for the sake of saving democracy, and avoiding a possible civil war. They should realise that even a free and fair election cannot be credible as long as the voter list is not corrected, the fake voters names deleted, and left out voters names included. In fact, cooperation of the 4-party alliance in preparing a credible voters' list will enhance their position among members of opposition camp, and will be highly appreciated by the common people.

ABMS ZAHUR

DURING the last 59 years (1947-2006) we have passed through crisis after crisis. In 1958, just two years after Pakistan got its first constitution; General Ayub destroyed the sapling of democracy by grabbing power through a military coup. After a decade Ayub had to abdicate and hand over power to the then Chief of Armed Forces General Yahya Khan in 1969. Even though AL had won the majority of seats in the then

Pakistan parliament (in 1970) Yahya refused to hand over power to Sheikh Mujib. This resulted in the war of independence, and the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state in 1971. Awami League was forced out of power in 1975 through a civil-military coup. General Ziaur Rahman became president in 1977. Zia's assassination in 1981 created a sort of vacuum, and General Ershad captured power through a bloodless coup in 1982. After around

nine years Ershad had to step down in the face of joint movement by AL and BNP in 1990. After the restoration of democracy we have had three democratic regimes, one ruled by BNP, one by AL and one by BNP-led 4-party alliance. Unfortunately, the parties (BNP and AL) that together restored democracy are now fighting each other to destroy the democratic order in the country because of their mutual suspicion, greed for power and difference in political ideology. However, it is

doubtful as to how far these parties really care for the people despite the fact that the founder of AL, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, struggled throughout his life for the economic and political emancipation of the people of the country.

On the other hand, Zia not only fought directly against the Pakistani forces but also, apparently, promoted the right of the people to freedom of thought and expression. It is indeed sad that both these leaders were assassinated. Now we are struggling to save our hard earned democracy because of lack of confidence among the major political parties.

It is interesting that lack of mutual trust resulted in the addition of a provision for a non-party caretaker government. The main task of this government is to hold a free, fair and neutral election.

careaker government without much scrutiny or deliberation. This resulted in the existence of some flaws, which are creating various hurdles in running parliamentary democracy smoothly.

If the mutual suspicion could be done away with there would not be any necessity for a caretaker government. At the moment, what is needed is reformation of the election commission by strengthening it and making it completely free from the executive.

Whatever failures or successes we have seen of the past caretaker governments, this is for the first time that we are faced with a situation in which a partisan president has become the chief of the caretaker government through, reportedly, adopting dubious means. Needless to say that it is extremely difficult for a pro-BNP president to act as a non-party, neutral chief of CTG.

We do not understand why he is holding so many portfolios when he is so old (76 yrs). It is reported

that more than two thousand files of the ministries under his charge are pending. If he does not find enough time to spare for disposal of these cases he may ask for assistance from advisers like Akbar Ali Khan, Shafi Sami, Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury and others. He must trust his advisers. He must not try to perform beyond his capability.

The following factors may be identified as the causes for failure of a chief adviser:

- An individual loyal to one party cannot act as an absolutely neutral person;
- A very old person cannot perform the arduous task of the chief adviser of CTG under tremendous stress and strain;
- Not having much trust in the advisers;
- Not realizing the consequences of his failure to finish the task.

The EC still claims that a fair, free and credible election is possible with a faulty voters' list, which includes about 13 million fake voters and excludes a very large number of genuine voters. The feeble steps of the chief adviser of CTG cannot assure us of a free, fair and credible election, unless the 4-party alliance agrees to contest on a level field, for the sake of saving democracy, and avoiding a possible civil war. They should realise that even a free and fair election cannot be credible as long as the voter list is not corrected, the fake voters names deleted, and left out voters names included. In fact, cooperation of the 4-party alliance in preparing a credible voters' list will enhance their position among members of opposition camp, and will be highly appreciated by the common people.

ABMS Zahur is a former Joint Secretary.