

# Here comes the khaki again?

**From 1975 onwards, army involvement in our domestic politics has dirtied the khaki. Chucho marthe haath moila korthe hoi, and the army has been unable to keep its hands clean. During the Ershad years, the army was so compromised that I stopped riding in my father's olive green car. It did not matter that it carried an "Army Medical Corps" insignia (army doctors being one group that stayed clear of politics) -- army was army, and in those days it was not seen as anything positive. But the subsequent years have largely erased the legacy of the Ershad years, and today's armed forces no longer carry the same stigma of obstacle to democracy. Does the army really want to go back to those dark days?**

**NAEEM MOHAIEEM**

IT'S a terrible moment to realize that your elders have call feet, that they can make mistakes. Amar baba shob jane, went a phrase when I was growing up. Yes, our parents knew everything. They were not to be questioned, doubted, or second-guessed.

It was a turning point when I finally realized that my father could indeed be wrong. All this came about while he was defending a cherished institution -- the one that put food on our table, provided for his education and career, and our whole family's well being.

The Bangladesh army. This moment, the one I'm thinking of, came when I first dived into

an argument about the Chittagong Hill Tracts at the dinner table. I was still a teenager -- sure of my convictions, but green in my debating skills. I had just talked about the army's "pacification" campaigns against the Pahari/Jumma people.

"You don't know what you're talking about," my father replied, "The army is there to keep the peace. They are doing what the civilians cannot. Without them, there would be chaos. We are here because the politicians failed!"

We are there because the politicians failed...

I hesitated. I was certain I was right. We Bengalis were practicing ethnic cleansing in the Hill Tracts. The government was exploiting army jawans to keep the Pahari

(Jumma) population terrorized, and Bengali settlers were subsidized to displace Paharis from their homeland. Like occupying armies elsewhere, the Bangla soldiers believed they were a force for good (after all, it was within our own borders) -- even when the indigenous population ran scared from their guns.

But wait, my father was always right. Wasn't he?

I retrieve this memory as a prologue to explain that my critique of army involvement in civilian affairs comes, and has always come, from within. My father retired as a major general in the medical corps. Another uncle was a major general in engineering corps (and head of NSI) and a third uncle was a major general and finance minister for the

Ershad regime (the only cabinet member who maintained a neutral stance and did not join the JP). Many of my youthful moments were spent in the cantonment, waiting for my father to finish work, or visiting my uncle. Idle moments were spent admiring the kuchkaway of soldiers. Every time they passed a senior officer, they gave a smart salute. In a country lacking in rules, discipline or methods, it was a heart-warming sight.

Looking at these smartly turned out men, my father used to share a phrase from the British army: "We always say, if it's moving, salute it, if it's standing still, paint it white." It was a mild joke, but within it was immense pride about the institution that made him who he was. I liked seeing that emotion, a precious and rare commodity.

Despite my long association with the army, and benefiting from the privileges of that institution, I feel fear and cold dread as I watch news reports of khaki in the streets once again. The past is future again, as we see the injection of the army into democracy. The president can talk a good game, but his chess move in bringing the soldiers out is clear. He is now exploiting the army to be the

iron fist in a velvet glove. *Shabdhari*, too much theri beri, and we will bring in military. *Tharpor bujbe thela. Gononthro koi jal.*

Of course bringing in the army to ensure law and order does not automatically mean a military coup. But the more the army is used to take care of civilian tasks, the more people may ask, well why do we need democracy? Er cheye army bhalo. And that is how it always starts...

Theoretically, both BNP and AL have much to fear from another military coup. But AL has a history of a family wiped out in Dhanmondi (and later the four leaders in Dhaka jail) at the hands of renegade elements within the army. Naturally, they are more fearful of the military than BNP. Of course, Ershad was an equal opportunity punisher, running the jackboot on both BNP and AL. But in the current situation, the AL is the one who is harmed more, since it is their street protests that are being targeted.

Our modern army has shown that it can be, in the right circumstances, a force for good. In UN missions abroad, the Bengali peacekeepers have set high standards and risked their lives.

Bangladeshi soldiers are the second largest providers of UN troops. Current deployment is in 12 countries, and 63 soldiers have been killed in active duty (my cousin was one of them). Peacekeeping earns Bangladesh almost \$200 million a year.

The UN says Bangladeshi soldiers are in demand because they are highly disciplined and there are fewer complaints of corruption or sexual harassment against them than soldiers from other countries. Speaking of the impact on domestic politics, Professor CR Abrar of Dhaka University told the BBC: "They have gained international prestige, they have gained international legitimacy. So I think they would think twice or thrice before engaging in such adventurism [as military coup]."

When we read of Bengali peacekeepers guarding Mogadishu airport, flying helicopter squadrons in Ituri (Congo), controlling rebel territory in Sierra Leone, and flying the UN flag in besieged Bihac (Yugoslavia), we felt a twinge of pride. But if we look at the history of army deployment inside Bangladesh, these occasions have not harnessed this same positive



energy.

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anything positive. But the subsequent years have largely erased the legacy of the Ershad years, and today's armed forces no longer carry the same stigma of obstacle to democracy.

Can the army resist the political manipulations of those who want to send us back to the bad old days?

Naem Mohaiem (naem@shobak.org) wrote the chapter on Chittagong Hill Tracts for ASK's 2004 Annual Report.

# Overview of Nagorik Forum's vision paper

**KAZI SM KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI**

ON December 9, a set of recommendations by the Nagorik Forum -- a vision paper for Bangladesh in 2021, and a draft of the ordinances for bringing necessary amendments to the Representation of People Order (RPO) -- prepared through 15 dialogues across the country, was formally handed over to the two major political parties, BNP and Awami League.

In this comprehensive document the civil society recommended bringing about massive reforms in the political system, electoral laws, electoral code of conduct and administration so as to strengthen democracy in Bangladesh, and reap its benefits. A brief recount of the major recommendations is in order:

- Mandatory audit of earnings and expenditures of all political parties: It is common knowledge these days that the funds of major political parties come mainly from ill-begotten money holders. It is also an open secret that money making during incumbency is not motivated by

self-interest only. Increasing the party's funds is also a major factor that drives the political parties mad for amassing money for the next general elections. Mandatory audit is supposed to act as a viable deterrent in this regard.

- Bar on becoming chief of a political party for more than three consecutive terms: Complete lack of democracy in the political parties that cry hoarse for democracy is a burning issue in our country. Democratization within the political parties not only brings dynamism and the motivation to perform better, it also definitely infuses tolerance of the rival political parties in the leadership, and the rank and file, something which has become a rarity in our political arena, leading to the contemporary extreme political confrontations.
- Bar on the same person becoming head of the government and chief of a political party: This mechanism will no doubt work as a real check and balance. It will definitely provide more time and space to both the persons. In our country the tendency to cling to

more and more posts gives rise to manifold problems. Besides, there are many instances in history which show that great leaders cannot become great statesmen. Thus, the jobs can well be apportioned according to aptitudes, and the result is bound to be productive.

- Professional bodies should not be affiliated with political parties: Unfortunately, most of the professional bodies of the country representing the civil society are now divided into two poles. Truly, there are many points and demands of the civil society groups which coincide with those of political parties. However, reluctance to call a spade a spade on the part of many affiliated professional bodies undermines the very appeal and force of the concept of civil society.
- Issue of women's empowerment and gender equality: Gender equality strengthens a country's abilities to grow, to reduce poverty, and to govern effectively. Promoting gender equality is thus an important part of a development strategy that seeks to enable all people to escape

poverty and improve their standard of living. Meanwhile, women empowerment is an instrument to set in motion a balanced and harmonious process of development.

- Unfortunately, however, major political parties in Bangladesh, at best, provide lip service to these vital issues.
- Loan defaulters should be barred from participating in the election: Though loan defaulters cause severe damage to the country's economy, their importance increases enviously during the elections times in Bangladesh. Parties start vying for nominating loan defaulters as they promise to come out successful in the elections through the money they have not given back. Moreover, arrangements by the banks to save the hardened loan defaulters embolden them all the more.
- None should be allowed to contest in more than two constituencies: I, however, think it should ideally be one man, one constituency. The system of contesting in five seats is not only ridiculous, it is also a sort of insult to the people whose constituencies are

forsaken by the winners during the by-election. By preventing such farcical elections wastage of money can be stemmed, and promotion of local leadership ensured.

- Number of women's seats should be increased, with a provision for direct election: The percentage of successful candidates in the national parliament rose slightly in 1996 elections. But, that is again declining, the percentage was just one percent in the last elections. Interestingly, the elected women members include the top political leaders of the mainstream political parties, i.e. Khaleeda Zia of BNP and Sheikh Hasina of AL. No woman belonging to the rank and file has yet registered victory in the national parliament.
- Separate voter lists for the three hill districts in the light of the peace treaty: This is likely to quell growing tension among the tribal people due to lackadaisical approach of the government in implementing the peace treaty. The world is increasingly adopting cultural pluralism. Bangladesh just cannot lag far

behind. Thus, concerted efforts to integrate the tribal people into the national identity, with genuine respect for their distinct culture, should become more the rule than the exception.

- Six days of election in six divisions: This will certainly contribute to making elections more transparent and secured. As the administration will be able to provide better support, the margin of error in all respects is bound to decrease to a minimum. However, security personnel will have to make extra efforts to arrest entry of goons (from other divisions) who might become rampant during the election days.
- Deduction of allowances for the parliament members for absent days: Admittedly, quorum crisis was a regular phenomenon during the tenure of the last parliament. Though the opposition parties boycotted the parliament for a long time, the ruling party members also enforced a sort of auto-boycott through remaining absent in the parliament for many a day, contributing to severe damage to the working

hours.

- Making it mandatory for the public representatives to stay at least 10 days a month in their locality: In Bangladesh, there are instances that some members of parliament visit their constituencies just a few times in between two elections. Some even boast that there is no need to go to villages and talk to the poor people who are quite happy with the money dished out to buy votes during the elections.
- The president to be elected through an electoral college: The proposed system of electing a president will provide more fervour to the presidency. In the present system anybody can become a president with the blessings of the majority party in the parliament. The president-elect thus remains more loyal to the parliament members than to the people. Hopefully, the Electoral College system will fetch better personalities for the exalted position.
- Ensuring vote casting by the minority community without fear, and cabinet membership based on local quota: Frankly speaking,

ensuring fearless vote casting by the minority in Bangladesh becomes a real problem in some areas of the country. However, for making the elections really free and fair, there is no alternative to uprooting this menacing spectre. While political parties have a major role to play to ensure this, tougher mechanisms should be in place to be followed by the local administration.

- Electing prime minister from the party with majority seats speaker from second majority and deputy speaker from the third majority: The current system of majority party grabbing everything hardly shows respect to the people who have voted against the majority. Thus, providing something to others will definitely reflect the true spirit of democracy.

Kazi SM Khasrul Alam Quddusi is Assistant Professor, Dept. of Public Administration, University of Chittagong.

# New wave in Latin America

**IMRAN KHALID**

TO the utter disdain of Washington, the continent is changing -- and changing really fast. Though Fidel Castro is now at the twilight of his innings the last one decade has witnessed an unprecedented shift towards the left and socialism -- though obscurely defined -- that seems to be getting out-of-sway of the United States at the moment. Latin America has started to give headaches to the policy-makers in Washington. One after another, the "democratically elected" leaders of Latin America are turning towards socialism and Bolivarian revolution.

During the current busy electoral year in Latin America five leftist presidents have been voted into office, or won another term. Last month, Rafael Correa, a young, US-educated economist but with a

radical approach, emphatically won the presidential elections in Ecuador. Correa's electoral victory is being labeled as another triumph for Hugo Chavez who has been striving for the infusion of socialism and Bolivarian thinking in the continent.

Correa has vowed to put the brakes on Ecuador's participation in the US-backed Free Trade Area for the Americas, to join OPEC and to close down the US military base at Manta. Being a staunch critic of the neo-liberal economic thinking of the globalised world, and the so-called Washington Consensus, that has inflicted this dogma upon Latin America for the last two decades, Correa is likely to emerge as a resolute member of the Chavez camp that has been championing Latin America's "second independence."

Now, with the re-election of Hugo Chavez as the President of

Venezuela until 2012, the socialist tide sweeping through the continent has got the real impetus that is expected to set the political tone for the coming days -- more headaches for Washington. Chavez is undoubtedly at the forefront of the on-going transition in the political and social complexion of Latin America. Chavez has emerged as a symbol of success for socialist reforms in the continent, and the rest of his neighbours are also preparing to imitate his model. His close association with Fidel Castro has further irked the Americans who believe that he is quickly assuming the role of heir-apparent to Castro.

There are similarities between Castro and Chavez -- both have prospered in the wake of left-wing resurgence in Latin America. By flexing his oil muscle Chavez has been directly colliding with the

United States in Castro-style. He represents the Bolivarian revolution, named after South American liberation hero Simon Bolivar, as a model for regional solidarity against US policies. Just like Castro, he is effectively exploiting the prevailing anti-US sentiments in the region. Although Latin Americans, who still see Castro as an icon, have been somewhat cautious in embracing Chavez as a substitute for the aging Castro, he has certainly carved an image as a real firebrand who is a propagator of radical change in the continent.

He openly slanders US free trade deals as neo-imperialism, but while doing so he forgets that these deals are a lifeline for his neighbours. The oil wealth has given Chavez the kind of economic and political independence not enjoyed by Castro. But he is using the petrodollars very intelligently. On the

domestic front, unlike his predecessors, he has been using the petrodollars to generously support the poverty alleviation programmes, literacy campaign, health facilities in the slum areas, free treatment to HIV/AIDS sufferers, and special tuition for early school leavers, and evening classes for adults. In a country of 25 million, seventeen million now have free access to healthcare facilities for the first time in their lives, while some fifteen million have been given access to food, medicine and other essential item at very reasonable prices. So far, the government, to rescue people from blindness, has financed 250,000 eye surgeries.

Though no independent surveys and statistics are available to confirm Chavez's claim that the percentage of people below the poverty line has dropped from 50 percent to 37 percent, the munifi-

cent social spending in poor districts suggest that he may be right in his claim about poverty alleviation in general. He has achieved all these social reforms despite a very hostile private media being largely run by his opponents. Perhaps it is the success of his social reforms plan, and its direct impact on the living standards of the lower strata of the Venezuelan society, that has enabled him to muster 63% of votes in the presidential elections.

But, being a keen strategist, though lacking academic sophistication, Chavez has not confined the benefits of his petrodollars to the Venezuelans only. Instead, he has lavishly supported his brethren from Cuba to Bolivia in their development projects. Thousands of Cuban and Latin American professionals are working in Venezuela at fairly attractive wages. His oil-funded social programmes are

being executed in different neighbouring countries, generating a backing for him in the region as a leader for the next decade.

His slogan of greater South American integration has its own attraction. And when the people see him practically sponsoring this notion through his oil profits they have no option but to respond positively to such overtures. That is precisely what has happened with his phenomenal rise as the chief spokesman for Latin America's emerging socialist bloc. Now he is talking about the plans for \$20 billion to construct a 9,000-kilometer long natural gas pipeline to supply gas from Venezuela to Brazil, Argentina and other countries.

Despite all its technical flaws, the trans-Latin America pipeline project is an extremely generous, and lavish, too, venture that will

further pull the energy-hungry Latin Americans towards Hugo Chavez. Interestingly, Chavez and his supporters in the continent are themselves not clear about their socialist agenda. Obviously, they are not thinking about a Soviet-style socialist package. They do realize that the time is over for this kind of experimentation. In fact, they are in the middle of concocting a new version and definition of socialism. Indubitably, they are drawing their inspiration from lavish oil funding by Chavez and its impact on the continent as a whole. But still they are confused.

Dr Imran Khalid is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

# The Baker Boys

**GREG PALAST**

THEY'RE kidding, right? James Baker III and the seven dwarfs of the "Iraq Study Group" have come up with some simply brilliant recommendations. Not.

Baker's Two Big Ideas are:  
1. Stay half the course. Keeping 140,000 troops in Iraq is a disaster getting more disastrous. The Baker Boys' idea: cut the disaster in half -- leave 70,000 troops there. But here's where dumb gets dumber: the Bakerites want to "embed" US forces in Iraqi army units. Question one, Mr Baker: What Iraqi army? This so-called "army" is a rough confeder-

ation of Shia death squads. We can tell our troops to get "embedded" with them, but the Americans won't get much sleep.

2. "Engage" Iran. This is a good one. How can we get engaged when George Bush hasn't even asked them out for a date? What will induce the shy mullahs of Iran to accept our engagement proposal? Answer: The Bomb. Let me explain. To get the Iranians to end their subsidizing the Mahdi Army and other Shia cut-throats, the Baker bunch suggest we let the permanent members of the UN Security Council -- plus Germany -- decide the issue of Iran's nukes. Attaching Germany is the signal.

These signers of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) agree that Iran should be allowed a "peaceful" nuclear power program.

Now, I am absolutely wary of neo-con nuts who want to blow Iran to Kingdom-come over its nuclear ambitions. But that doesn't mean we should kid ourselves. Iran has zero need of "peaceful" nuclear-generated electricity. It has the second-largest untapped reserve of natural gas on the planet, a clean, safe, cheap source of power. There's only one reason for a "nuclear" program, and it's not to light Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's bedside lamp.

Here's the problem with Baker's weird combo of embedding our boys with Iraq's scary army while sucking up to the Iranians: it won't work. The mayhem will continue, with Americans in the middle, because the Baker brigade dares not mention two words: "Saudi" and "Arabia."

Saudi Arabia is the elephant in the room (camel in the tent?) that can't be acknowledged -- and the reason Baker is so desperately anxious to sell America on keeping half our soldiers in harm's way. James III wants to seduce or bully Iran into stopping their funding of the murderous Shia militias. But the Shias only shifted into mass killing mode in response to

the murder spree by Sunni "insurgents."

Where do the Sunnis get their money for mayhem? According to a seething memo by the National Security Agency (November 8), the Saudis control the "public or private funding provided to the insurgents or death squads." Nice.

Baker wants us to bribe or blackmail Iran into stopping one side in Iraq's uncivil war, the Shia. Yet we close our eyes to the Saudis acting as a piggy bank for the other side, the Sunni berserkers. (The House of Saud follows Wahabi Islam, a harsh, fundamentalist sect of Sunnism.) Why is Baker, ordinarily such a

tough guy, so coy with the Saudis? Baker Botts, the law firm his grandfather founded and he runs, became a wealthy powerhouse by representing Saudi Arabia. But don't worry, the Iraq Study Group is balanced by Democrats including Vernon Jordan of the law firm of Akin, Gump which represents, Saudi royals.

Of course, the connections between Baker, the Bush family and the Saudis go way beyond a few legal bills. (See, "The Best Little Legal Whorehouse in Texas" in my book, "Armed Madhouse.") Baker is more than aware that, weeks ago, Dick Cheney dropped his Thanksgiving turkey to fly to Riyadh, at the demand of the

Saudis, for a dressing down by King Abdullah. The king wants US forces to stay to baby-sit the Shias in Iraq's army. The Saudis have made it clear that, if the US pulls out our troops, Saudi Arabians will crank up payments to their brothers, the Sunni warlords in Iraq, and Baghdad, or the entire region, will run with blood.

The outcome was foregone: King Abdullah's wish is Cheney's command -- and Baker's too. And so 70,000 of our soldiers will stay. What gives King Abdullah the power to ghost-write the Iraq Study Group recommendations? It's not because the Saudis sell us broccoli. And therein lies the danger.

Behind the fratricidal fracas in Iraq is something even more dangerous than civil war -- a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia over control of Iraq's pivotal position in OPEC, the oil cartel. Because what is painted by Baker's Iraq Study Group as an ancient local clash between Shia and Sunni over the Kingdom of God, is, in fact, a remote control war between Iran and Saudi Arabia over the Kingdom of Oil.

Greg Palast is the author of the New York Times bestseller, "Armed Madhouse" which includes Palast's investigation, conducted for Harper's Magazine, of the secret role of James Baker III and Saudi Arabia in the forming of US plans for Iraq's oil.

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