

Mr. Iajuddin and his advisers

Stop the one-man show

NEW advisers have been inducted in place of the four that resigned. We regret their departure. These were persons of diverse background but had gelled well as a team. They had captured public confidence by their commitment and by their integrity. We would like to pay our highest tribute to the four ex-advisers for their contributions and reject the suggestion by the Jamaat Amir that they failed to act neutrally. Nothing can be further from the truth. Their resignation is ample testimony to their honesty and integrity.

However, without prejudging the ability of the new members of the council of advisers, we cannot help but say that they will take time to gel before they can deliver; and time is not on their side. We would like to emphasise here that the departure of the four advisers were the direct consequence of the way Mr. Iajuddin conducted the affairs of the caretaker government that increasingly marginalised the advisers. Therefore, the efficacy of the new team will depend on how well the chief adviser allows them to operate. They must be convinced that it will not be a one-man show, which regrettably Mr. Iajuddin has turned the caretaker government into, and that was the fundamental issue on which the four were compelled to resign.

It is a matter of concern that Mr. Iajuddin has not been able to distinguish the two posts he is holding. And unless he suppresses his compulsions to act unilaterally we are afraid that there might be more resignations. We are not sure whether Mr. Iajuddin realises either the grave crisis that his go-it-alone policy has thrust the country into. Is he also aware that his actions are perceived as being motivated by the need to keep the interest of the BNP and its alliance partners above everything else?

Mr. Iajuddin should be aware that his retention of absolute power and working in a dictatorial fashion makes us ridiculous in the international eye, as being nothing more than 'Iazuddin's fiefdom'. He has not only taken up huge responsibilities on his shoulders, he has also made himself the prime focus of the national and international observers. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, he has been utterly unsuccessful in acquitting himself creditably. He must get his acts together if he would not like to be judged harshly by his countrymen now and in the future.

It is essential that Mr. Iajuddin rises above his partisan preferences, works as a team member and takes decisions, as a caretaker head should, collectively, if the chances of holding the forthcoming election as well as our national interest are not to be jeopardized.

Voter list mess

Confidence of citizens fading away

THE task of correcting and updating the voter list is registering little progress with more flaws being revealed and allegations of irregularities raised about the manner in which the work is being conducted. The Election Commission (EC) has yet to convince the citizens that it has all the mechanism in place to clear the mess that it had created in the first place. It would be saying the least that with every passing day the faith of the citizens in the ability of the EC to right the wrong is ebbing fast.

Disconcerting news is coming to the media from all over the country with regard to the process of updating the voter list. Though the deadline is fast approaching, residents in many parts of the capital city complained that there were no sign of the list updating work in the area, while in some other area the number of voters increased abnormally after updating. There is further allegation that in other parts of the country political activists forcibly entered names of their own people in the list.

A correct and updated voter list is the prerequisite of a free, fair and acceptable election. The Election Commission is the state organ on which the solemn responsibility of preparing such an instrument rests as per the dictate of the Constitution. But the manner in which the EC and its controversial commissioners have carried out the responsibility leaves one wondering about their skill, sincerity and wisdom. The EC has to step in to expedite the work and also do it properly so that genuine voters are not left out of the list. The task requires engaging the right number of trained personnel who would be motivated enough to do their work with utmost sincerity. The EC has to realise that time is not on its side anymore.

Better late than never

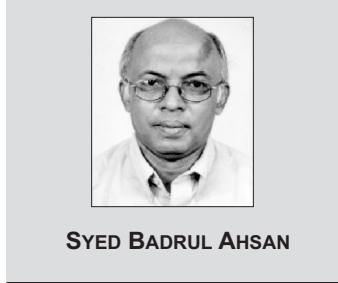
A B MS ZAHUR

EXCEPT the supporters of 4-party alliance all the conscious citizens of Bangladesh were unhappy about the formation of the present caretaker government only because the president, a purely BNP man decided to become the chief of the CTG ignoring a number of steps of the constitution apparently to help his party to realise its dream to capture power again to consolidate the enormous gain made by some of its members during its five-year rule. The BNP, through unprecedented corruption and politicisation of administration, law enforcing agencies, lower judiciary spared no pains to ensure its victory at the polls. We do agree that corruption is the lubricant of political machinery or accept Bernard Shaw's definition of morality as "the lack of opportunity", but 4-party alliance government has exceeded all limits.

We have gained a new knowledge that a democratic government, if run or dominated by people

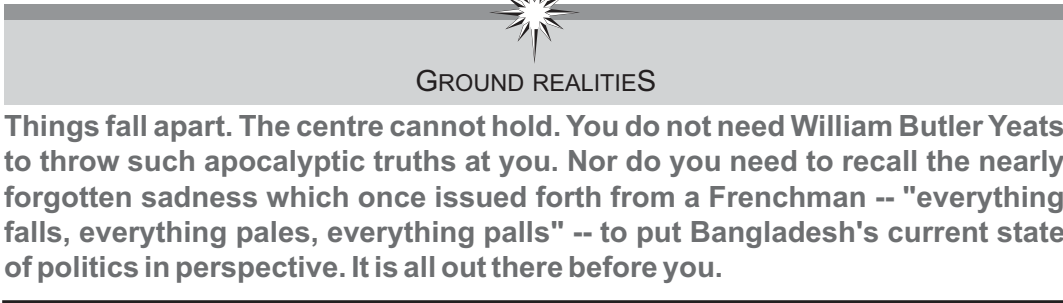
who do not believe in the sovereignty of the people, try to bluff the common people with slogans and statements like 'we believe in development because we think a lot about the people' and 'the opposition do not like development because they do not care about people'. We may 'amend the constitution for the people (when we need it) but opposition should not be permitted to do it because they may do it only to distort the constitution'. 'As we are holding more than two-thirds majority in the parliament it suggests we have the right to think and act for the welfare of the people'.

To take control of the CTG the four-party alliance resorted to all sorts of tricks. The EC, though supposed to be independent and neutral, is virtually under the control of the PMO. Thus strong influence of the executive always remains on this statutory body. The 4-party government not only controlled its budget, its personnel were also dictated by the PMO indirectly. Indeed an extremely unfortunate state of affairs for a parliamentary



IT does not come as any surprise, none at all, that President Iajuddin Ahmed has precipitated a grave crisis in the country through not doing what he should have done in the larger interest of the nation. When he first let it be known that he wished to head the caretaker administration as chief advisor, the suspicion arose that the political process in Bangladesh, already battered and beaten, was headed for more of such mauling. At this point in time, despite everything Iajuddin Ahmed and his friends among the "Bangladeshi nationalists" might say about how the constitution has been and is being upheld, the truth is that, since the departure of the four-party alliance government from office in late October, it has been the constitution that has been at the receiving end of the whip.

Iajuddin Ahmed's clear reluctance to go by all the provisions relating to the appointment of the chief advisor of the caretaker administration will certainly be interpreted, years hence, as a conscious, even premeditated assault on the constitution. And that is not all. When you hear Justice Mahfuzur Rahman tell you that the president of the republic has no authority to appoint an acting chief election commissioner (under whom the judge might have to work), your heart bleeds once more for the constitution. Should some-



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one not be asking Justice Rahman about the precise constitutional provision upon which he appointed himself acting CEC once Justice MA Aziz was persuaded to go on leave?

Let us not talk about the sanctity of the constitution any more, for if we do, we run the risk of seeing our hearts break into a thousand pieces. When Khaleda Zia and her friends remind the country, day after day and well into the long winter night, about the national imperative of having everything operate within the parameters of the constitution, we are tempted to ask whether the many deaths in crossfire that occurred on the watch of the BNP-led government were symbolic of a strict adherence to the constitution. That is a question which, of course, every good, conscientious citizen is asking these days. Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and all those others in his political tribe have so far made no response to that.

But, yes, they have cheerfully made it clear that by calling in the army to aid the civil administration in maintaining law and order President Iajuddin Ahmed has done the right thing. You are then intrigued. Where was the disorder that normally precedes such action? All the siege programmes the Awami League and its allies have been observing of late have been admirable exercises in how to devise a peaceful way of bringing about political change. You can refer, in this context, to some of the

soul-cheering revolutions that have taken place in other spots around the world.

In the old Czechoslovakia, in Ukraine, in Georgia, et al, tens of thousands of men and women had simply mounted a vigil against the depredations of bad men, and they had done the job in a civilized, tranquil manner. In Lebanon, the Hezbollah has been organizing some very well-attended rallies against the Fouad Siniora government. What has been happening in Bangladesh, despite all the calumny against such demonstrations of the popular will, has been our own version of People Power. How then do armoured personnel carriers come into the picture?

Quite clearly, President Iajuddin Ahmed has not been able to bring himself to appreciate the nature of the on-going movement for democracy. His late night address to the nation on Sunday was a very unambiguous reflection of his sentiments. For Bengalis who remember the tragedy that took hold of their lives back in 1971, Iajuddin's address sounded eerily reminiscent of the way General Yahya Khan berated us all in that darkest of seasons for this country.

When Bangabandhu and the Awami League publicly, and loudly, protested the postponement of the National Assembly session on March 1, 1971, Yahya Khan was forced to take to the waves again, this time to suggest that a round table conference be convened. But

before he did that, he spent a considerably large segment of his speech pinning the blame for the gathering crisis on the Awami League. He should have condemned Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and the Pakistan People's Party for the palpable threat they were holding out against democracy.

On Sunday, so many long years after those disturbing remarks by Yahya Khan, Professor Iajuddin Ahmed seemed to be repeating history. His indignation against the siege programmes of the fourteen-party alliance was unequivocal. And yet he could have tried to be different, despite the political background on which his presidency is based. He could have made a serious attempt at statesmanship, through quietly and yet decisively guiding the country out of all the mess at the Election Commission, left behind in a heap, of course, by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its kindred spirits. Had he been able to do that, we as a people could well have spotted in the move something of an attempt on the part of the President to redeem himself in the public eye.

It seems that redemption is not on the cards, at least not yet. And what we have before us now is the spectacle of a severe earthquake in the making. How else can you describe the dramatic, and perfectly justified, resignation of four of the ten advisors in the caretaker government? One begins to wonder. Did the president have abso-

lutely no idea, when he spoke to the country on Sunday night, that he was about to set in motion an entirely new train of problems for this long-suffering nation? Or did someone on his staff (there is no dearth of dubious advice being churned out at the presidential palace these days) convince him that it would not matter much if some of the advisors resigned, that he could always find replacements for them?

To be sure, no man or woman is indispensable. That being an article of faith in so very many spheres of life, Iajuddin Ahmed will not find it hard to choose a few new individuals to fill the vacancies that have just been created. But where can you get such morally upright people as Akbar Ali Khan, CM Shafi Sami, Sultana Kamal and Hasan Mashud Chowdhury in a society rapidly being denuded of incorruptible people? They have, in these forty-plus days since they entered the corridors of power and then left them, done a good, even courageous job despite the hard circumstances around them. And beyond the morality factor there is the extremely political matter of how the resignations have given the Iajuddin administration a deservedly rude jolt.

Government is serious business. It is never a classroom where pupils stand and tremble in awe of the headmaster. By ignoring the advisors, by endlessly embarrassing them through taking decisions without taking them into confidence, by hacking away at the collegial spirit of the caretaker system, President Iajuddin Ahmed has created the grounds for the calamity the people of Bangladesh have now been pushed into. The headmaster has compelled his pupils, individuals for whom self-esteem is important, into deserting the classroom.

It is a terribly wrenching condition when the head of government

lets his colleagues know, in so many ways, that they really do not matter. By undercutting the advisors on such issues as the package proposal for a reconstitution of the Election Commission, the president/chief advisor did not merely strike at their self-esteem and intelligence but also raised anew the nauseating feeling that government was once more dwindling into a clandestine affair. You have to go back to everything that has been happening since Begum Zia's team quit office in October. The whiff of partisanship that has glued itself to the president is something you cannot ignore.

He took his own time to convince MA Aziz that he had to step aside in the interest of a fair and transparent election. But then the good deed was swiftly supplanted by a bad one. The president placed Modabber Hussain Chowdhury at the Election Commission despite the all too public knowledge of the former police official's leanings toward the BNP. Presidential actions must match the stature of the presidential office. The Modabber story was a definite corrosion of the majesty of power at Bangabhaban. Additionally, for Iajuddin Ahmed to insist that men like SM Zakaria hang on to their jobs is actually to suggest that the interests of the country can sometimes be cast to the wolves.

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Syed Badrul Ahsan is Executive Editor, Dhaka Courier

Iraq quagmire: Bush on horns of dilemma

The American people have spoken. Experts across the political spectrum have spoken. President Bush's newly appointed Secretary of Defense Gates has spoken, and the Iraq study group has spoken. Senator Hillary Clinton recommends that the president listen and change the course in Iraq. In spite of political and academic pressure the president is on the horns of dilemma on a future course of action as a result of a new element in the conflict -- Saudi concern.

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

IN spite of mounting pressure on the Bush administration for finding an exit strategy, an intriguing game is being played over the Iraq issue. Iraq has really become a quagmire whatever interpretations might be given by the White House on the bloodshed there. A situation of civil war exists in Iraq now. This is not a war on terrorism as President Bush continues to claim.

On the eve of the invasion the scenario in Iraq was normal and peaceful. It was a secular administration under Saddam Hussein, and people enjoyed religious freedom. When no weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq, and no link could be established between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaida, President Bush changed his rhetoric and started talking about exporting democracy and freedom to the Middle East. Iraq has never attacked US or US interests and played no role in the attack on September 11, 2001. All propaganda in this context by necons in the Bush administration has failed to convince anyone.

Exporting democracy has become an illusion, to say the least. Over the last three years, following the downfall of Saddam Hussein, the people have been watching with

disgust and anguish the events unfolding in Iraq. But in spite of a series of protest demonstrations against the war, all over the United States for the last three years, President Bush has not budged an inch from his stand on Iraq issue, showing that he is committed to stay the course whatever may happen.

The other side of the coin is that, having found no other alternative, the people of the United States have peacefully registered their voice against the Republican government in the Congressional elections on November 7. The message is clear and loud that the US should get out of Iraq without raising any question. The only person who does not seem to have learned the lesson from the elections is George W. Bush.

More than three centuries ago John Adams, the second president of US, spoke about the need to let evidence guide actions and policies. Facts are stubborn things; and passion cannot alter the state of facts and evidence. In making the unilateral decision to go to war in Iraq in 2003 President Bush allowed his wishes, inclinations and passion to alter the state of facts and evidence of the threat America faced from Iraq, a few thousand miles away in the Asian continent.

With the rise in the number of deaths of American soldiers in

occupied Iraq there has been mounting pressure on the Bush administration to pull out troops from there. The death toll of American troops stands at 3000 now, with several thousand wounded and many of them may not be able to lead an active life. Two schools of thought have emerged on the withdrawal of troops. The pro-administration group is of the opinion that total withdrawal of troops at this stage will tantamount to surrender to "terrorists," who have launched unabated violence, and that the Iraqi administration would face serious turmoil in the absence of well-organized police and military forces.

President Bush's recent rhetoric is that when Iraq stands up we will stand down, which means that when Iraqis themselves will be able to take over responsibility American troops will be withdrawn. In this context, the Bush administration has been arguing that progress has been made in training Iraqi police and military forces, but it has been moving at snail's pace as of now as can be seen from the assessment of America's top commander in Iraq, Gen. George Casey, who said, "Just one of the 120 US trained Iraqi army and police battalions was able to operate without US forces." It seems that training the Iraqi military and police will be a long drawn

process. By now over 66,000 Iraqis have lost their lives in the on-going war.

As the death toll of American soldiers continues to rise, the taxpayers bear the burden of the costs in Iraq war. The Iraq war costs taxpayers \$ 195 million per day. The non-partisan congressional budget office has estimated a cost of \$ 9 billion per month. It has exceeded \$ 1 trillion by now. This figure is based on the research done by Congressional Research Service.

There is growing discontent among the Americans, and they are questioning the motive of the Bush administration to go to war in Iraq which is costing billions of dollars and the lives of American soldiers, apart from the massive public debt. The cost of this war is the visible erosion of the American image; the breeding of a new generation of terrorists; and moral weakening of American power and will to face serious threats elsewhere.

Support for this war is declining rapidly as days pass by, which is the opposite of what happened during the Korean or Vietnam wars. The Bush administration's frequent change in rhetoric did not bring any change in the minds of Americans, except hard core Republicans. This change in rhetoric has caused doubt in the minds of Americans who are, by and large, unconcerned about the political game. Professor of political science, John Mueller, of Ohio State University in an article in "Foreign Affairs" said: "Casualty for casualty, support has declined far more quickly than it did during either the Korean or the Vietnam War. And if history is any indication, there is little the Bush administration can do to reverse this decline."

In respect of insurgency in Iraq, the Bush administration has also been playing a game. Initially they depicted the insurgents as Saddam Hussein's fidayeen. Secondly, they described insurgents as army personnel and followers of Baath Party. And thirdly, the notion of foreign fighters was added to this kind of rhetoric.

The use of this terminology intends to include Syria and Iran in the extended war of the Bush administration. The same game of regime change would be replayed here. Therefore, the situation is likely to be complicated further by this extended war, if it happens. Contrary to what the Bush administration has been propagating Congressman John Murtha, a Vietnam veteran, gave a picture of the situation in Iraq. He said that 93 percent are Iraqis while a very small percentage are foreign citizens; 80 percent Iraqis want that US should leave Iraq, and 45 percent think that it is justified to kill American troops."

Meanwhile, the Iraq study group led by James Baker, former secretary of state, and Lee Hamilton, former Chairman of Senate Foreign Relations Committee, came out with a lengthy report on December 6, which also reflects a grave picture in Iraq. It, however, recommends withdrawal of troops not before 2008, which serves the purpose of President Bush as he had announced that he would not quit Iraq during his presidency.

The situation in Iraq is one that President Bush and his advisers should have foreseen if they had followed the history of Iraq which has been torn by ethnic, religious, tribal and national rivalries for centuries. This being the picture of Iraq historically, President Bush, the senior, did

not contemplate to invade Iraq during Gulfwar 1 in 1991.

The American people have spoken. Experts across the political spectrum have spoken. President Bush's newly appointed Secretary of Defense Gates has spoken, and the Iraq study group has spoken. Senator Hillary Clinton recommends that the president listen and change the course in Iraq. In spite of political and academic pressure the president is on the horns of dilemma on a future course of action as a result of a new element in the conflict -- Saudi concern.

There has been a veiled warning from the Saudi Kingdom, one of the closest allies of America in the Middle East, not to leave Iraq at this stage, keeping Iraq unstable. As a result of growing influence of the Shiite community in the region the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is being threatened. The King is thinking that if the present conflict continues and spills over to the Kingdom the Royal family will face serious consequences. If president Bush leaves Iraq under pressure from home he is likely to face the music as the US is dependent on Saudi oil, 300 US-Saudi joint ventures are in operation in the Kingdom.

If the Bush administration does not listen to friendly advice and continues to stay, according to the strategy, the situation is likely to get worse in future. The bottom line of the insurgents' objectives is that the United States should pull out from Iraq in a disgraceful manner, as she did from Vietnam, or the Soviet Union from Afghanistan.

Mohammad Amjad Hossain, a former diplomat writes from Virginia.

elections. Extremely sad and sordid. Even the complaints of the victims were not recorded by the police in many cases. To stop these heinous acts we need neutral police force and constant vigilance of the local administration. Our administration must bear in mind that communal harmony quickens pace of development. Needless to say that more participation by the people in the development efforts of the government will make development less costly.

Without adequate cooperation from the returning officers, presiding officers and polling officers it may be beyond the capability of the election commission to hold free, fair and credible election. As the Ctg and the EC are already taking necessary steps to rectify and update the voters' list we may hope that correct and updated voters' list may be provided by the EC in the election in time.

Another problem for holding fair election is recently recruited 300 employees from BNP cadres in the EC. Their service may be dispensed with immediately to refrain them from

indulging in partisan activities.

It may be stated that life of the CTG may be extended beyond 90 (ninety) days in the interest of the people, for the sake of holding a truly free, fair and credible election in such a messy situation. Adequate preparations for the election cannot, perhaps, be completed within the next 40 days. Thus BNP's insistence on completing election within seven weeks time does not appear to be very reasonable. All other parties be allowed to participate fully with adequate preparation in the election to make it fair and credible.

For free flow of information about the various developments in the election the journalists may be provided with adequate security and protection against manhandling by police or the political activists. The advisers concerned (home and information) may take special note of this. In fact freedom of journalists to report fairly may indirectly control the improper use of money and muscle in the election.

In this CTG we see that the advisers are not encouraged to

work freely and fairly by the chief adviser because of his affiliation to the 4-party alliance. However, we recently observed some attitudinal change in him. But suddenly he also being the president has taken some unwanted step in the name of bringing congenial political atmosphere in the existing confrontational politics surcharged with mistrust and suspicion. He as CTG chief was rather lucky in having an impressive, mature and experienced advisers around him ever ready to assist him in solving intricate sensitive political problems. But on his calling in the army for the purpose without consulting them at least four of them have resigned, obviously to the detriment of situation. A learned person like him should, however, understand that only quality advices from his advisers can help him to complete his mission to offer this country a free, fair and credible election to strengthen the foundation of its democracy. Let CTG take to the right track even now.

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