

Inertia in finding a solution

Election under question mark

SUDDENLY all actions related to the resolution of the political impasse by carrying through the package deal to overcome the impediments to the holding of the parliamentary election seem to have ground to a halt.

In fact, the focus of the nation, and indeed the turmoil that the nation witnessed in the closing weeks of October, was pegged to the political crisis that centered on certain legitimate demands of the 14-party alliance. Though some of the demands have been met after a lot of agitation, other key ones have not been addressed with the seriousness that would make its resolution possible.

In fact, the resignation of the four advisers was exactly because of the failure on the part of the president to tackle the issues head on. And, in spite of the optimism that was exuded by the new advisors soon after their induction into the council, it has since evaporated as there has been no demonstrable activity on their part either in this regard, except for some inconsequential comments from time to time.

Why is it that we do not see any further initiative on the part of Mr Iajuddin towards resolution of the issues? Admittedly, everything so far has moved on his direction, and we cannot but be perturbed at the inertia on his part to bring an end to the crisis.

There being no demonstration on the streets nor siege of the capital should not lull him to the unrealistic conclusion that the problems have resolved themselves. He would be wrong to think that time will take care of the issues and that somehow he will be able to push the election down the throat of a large segment of the political divide who are not yet convinced that all the requirements that would ensure a free and fair election have been met.

It would be appropriate to mention that it was Mr Iajuddin who initiated the package deal and the talks, and it was his U-turn at the last moment which prevented the resolution of the matter. What his new advisors had said about finding a solution in three days has not been followed up.

Is it because the president has concluded that there is no further need for discussions with the political parties? If that is so, we suggest that it is the wrong conclusion to draw, and any action that follows based on that conclusion would put a big question mark on the prospect of election.

Hajj uncertain for some

Too many loose ends

THOUGH Hajj is a regular yearly phenomenon, yet the authorities every year put up a pathetic show of incompetence in performing their responsibilities right from the outset. Each year both ballottee and non-ballottee pilgrims suffer from a plethora of problems as incompetent officials and staff of the relevant ministries fail to do their jobs properly and within time.

We have noted with a degree of consternation that things did not improve even after the people at the helm of affairs have been changed. There are also the vicious vested groups that wait for the Hajj season to make a fortune at the cost of the pilgrims' suffering.

This year flight shortage and other problems have already cast a shadow of uncertainty over the fate of nearly 4,000 non-ballottee pilgrims. There is apprehension around the Hajj camp that if Bangladesh Biman fails to operate additional flights for three more days, the number of stranded pilgrims may rise to 12,000.

According to reports, the civil aviation and tourism ministry had made attempts to get seven foreign airlines to carry the additional number of pilgrims, as Biman was not capable to carry all. On the other hand, Biman is still awaiting additional landing permission from the Jeddah Airport authorities for the period of December 23 to 25.

It appears that the Hajj flight schedules have not been handled with efficiency by the Bangladesh Biman authorities from the very beginning, which is what gave rise to the crisis. There is a propensity to do things at the last moment when the patience of the pilgrims begins to run out.

We hope the authorities concerned would live up to the occasion and get all logistics in place so that all the pilgrims can safely reach the holy land and perform Hajj without any further hassles.

Where do we stand?



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD



GOING DEEPER

THIS twin job should be the primary responsibility of the liberal Muslims and should be assisted by the West as partners in progress. Now that the bell is about to ring for Bangladesh to go to the polls after enabling conditions are created for holding a free and fair election, the solemn duty of the voters would be to vote for an assembly of people who would guard the country from the onslaught of Islamic zealots.

bus for a shift in policy geared

W ould it be a credible proposition to proffer that President Bush's Iraq invasion was in fact a part of the continuing attempt by a section of orthodox Christians to continue the Crusades and the millennial rivalry between Islam and Christianity in a modern form?

Or could it be that the events of 9/11 brought home to the neo-cons in the Bush administration the realization that their belief of de-escalation of threat with the end of Cold War was a myth because hitherto unidentifiable foes in the shape of non-state actors were no less virulent in causing damage in the name of religion?

With the recently published Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group report, one is left with little doubt that the liberation of Kuwait with the aggression of Saddam Hussein and the invasion of Iraq by the Bush administration were entirely two different episodes -- the first one was totally supported by the international community (including a large number of Muslim countries) while the second was shrouded in illegitimacy.

The top military commanders are less sanguine these days re military solution of the Iraq imbroglio and are insistently advising president

jobs or even their lives.

The Americans are still paying their price for this bizarre policy of Paul Bremer, as explained by Middle East expert Larry Diamond, who briefly served Bremer as an advisor. In a recent article in Foreign Affairs magazine, Professor John Mueller suggests that "fears of the omnipresent terrorist may have been overblown, the threat presented in the US greatly exaggerated."

Such realizations by academics and politicians of impeccable credentials stridently voiced these days do contradict the thesis of people like Robert Kagan, who would like the Europeans "to do the dishes" (play second fiddle) and the Americans "to make the dinner" (take the lead).

The arrogance displayed in the Bush national security strategy of 2002 (and not significantly different in its 2006 version), which effectively subordinated international law and international institutions to US self-interest, invited universal dislike.

But US nuclear primacy and Kagan's view, widely providing the intellectual benchmark to the first Bush administration, led by the preaching of unmatched US muscularity by the likes of former defense secretary Donald

Rumsfeld, led the Bush administration along the path of finding a military solution in the Iraqi maze and of sounding military threats to dissuade the Iranians from their alleged ambition to become a nuclear weapon state.

While it is unlikely that the Americans will be able to extricate themselves from Iraq during the remaining time left to President Bush. Even with a puppet government in power, the US and the West would have to devise a policy which is less confrontational and more inclusive.

To quote Princeton professor of religion, Elaine Pagels: "The use of Satan to represent one's enemies lends to conflict a specific kind of moral and religious interpretation, in which 'we' are God's people and 'they' are God's enemies and ours."

This leads to the argument that use of terms like "Evil Empire" and "Axis of Evil" should be avoided and the Western leaders at every opportunity should not brand the terrorists as children of a particular religion which, some academics claim, refuses to accept Judeo-Christian civilization as an equal.

As it is, the Islamic diaspora is regarded with suspicion in the Western mind and Muslims are seen as possible members of al-



Qaeda bent upon causing imminent harm and therefore have to be kept at arm's length, thus exacerbating the process of alienation from the mainstream Western society.

Given the fact that the Western world, particularly the US, possesses military strength never seen before in the history of the world and the fact that their economies are considerably more advanced than those of the Islamic world, it would serve the interest of the Muslims that the so-called "purists" are denied political space if they become legitimate political entities and are physically confronted if they try to destroy the

thread of cohesion in a pluralistic society.

This twin job should be the primary responsibility of the liberal Muslims and should be assisted by the West as partners in progress. Now that the bell is about to ring for Bangladesh to go to the polls after enabling conditions are created for holding a free and fair election, the solemn duty of the voters would be to vote for an assembly of people who would guard the country from the onslaught of Islamic zealots.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

Nagorik Committee's recommendations



ANM NURUL HAQUE

BY THE NUMBERS

Among the recommendations, mandatory audit of the political party's accounts, introduction of an electoral college for electing the president, prohibition on contesting from more than two constituencies, restriction in leading a political party for three consecutive terms, no provision for the same person to head the government and a political party, electing a prime minister from the majority party, speaker from the second majority and the deputy speaker from the third majority party are outstanding, and demand serious consideration by the policy makers both in political parties and government.

the set of recommendations for bringing reforms in the polls and politics and also expressed similar views on curbing the influence of black money, corruption and terrorism in the poll process. Akbar Ali Khan, former adviser of the caretaker government, said that reforming the political parties is one of the most important changes required to realize some of the vision's goals.

The final set of recommendations gleaned from as many as 54 discussions and dialogues held throughout the country, where a mid-term vision paper for Bangladesh in 2021 and a draft ordinance for bringing necessary

amendments to the Representation of People's Order (RPO) were formally handed over to two key leaders of BNP and AL.

The two leaders from the two sides of the political division, BNP secretary general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and AL general secretary Abdul Jalil, who were the special guests at the function, agreed with

political parties terming it as the meddling of civil society in politics.

The pamphlet published by the CPD on the occasion of the Nagorik Forum's function held on December 9, contained as many as 72 recommendations on poll and political reforms. These recommendations are gleaned from the regional citizens' dialogues held between March 20 and December 9 across the country. Nearly 7,000 people participated in these dialogues and 1,300, who truly represented people from all strata of society, openly expressed their views on political issues.

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contesting from more than two constituencies, restriction in leading a political party for three consecutive terms, no provision for the same person to head the government and a political party, electing a prime minister from the second majority and the deputy speaker from the third majority party are outstanding, and demand serious consideration by the policy makers both in political parties and government.

The Nagorik Committee has tried to create pressure on the major political parties to nominate clean and competent candidates in the upcoming election. BNP has already begun interviewing candidates for nomination and AL is yet to start. The Nagorik Committee should now take this opportunity to create pressure on

the political parties to nominate honest and competent candidates. Otherwise, inducting honest and capable men into Parliament will remain a far cry.

Politics in Bangladesh is characterized by enormous odds. Politics of gaining power and plunder has destroyed all its intrinsic qualities. It has now turned into a dirty game that cannot be played without money and muscle. The nexus between crime and politics has given a boost to criminality. This particular political culture has engulfed the whole nation, making lives utterly miserable.

In the process of the elections becoming a game of black money and hooliganism, the Nagorik Committee, as we know it today, emerged with a vision for future Bangladesh, raising new hopes. The elections so far brought in a system that lacked competence, was unaccountable, and utterly failed to meet the people's demands and aspirations. However, the entire nation now looks forward to a free and fair election with honest and competent candidates.

The Nagorik Committee really deserves applause for being successful in creating a sort of psychological resistance among the conscious people against the entry of corrupt elements in politics. It has also done well in shaping a realistic vision for Bangladesh in 2021 and has come up with a comprehensive set of recommendations for the policy makers that both the government and the political parties can implement.

It is quite heartening that no less than the general secretaries of the two major parties have agreed with the set of recommendations of the Nagorik Committee. AL general secretary instantly assured that his party manifesto would reflect most of these recommendations. We earnestly expect that BNP will also act on these recommendations. The Nagorik Committee should act as a watchdog while advocating the candidature of honest and competent individuals.

There are lots of examples of civil society playing a vital role in restoring democracy. Prominent examples include the National Citizens' Movement for Free Election in Philippines that forced Marcos out of power. Civil society again succeeded in its campaign to oust Joseph Estrada for corruption. Very recently, civil society in Nepal played an active role in the democratic upsurge against the feudal monarchy. We certainly wish civil society in Bangladesh is able to play its due role to change politics for the well-being of the people.

ANM Nurul Haque is a Daily Star columnist.

Many histories of Bangladesh



In the future we will be able to see made-to-order films, which can be modified on demand as per our taste. You want to see a happy ending -- no problem -- press "happy ending;" or press "sad ending" or "more fighting" and so on. You want to see Devdas living happily ever after with Parbati as his wife; that is possible too. There will be several versions of the same movie. That future is now in Bangladesh -- not in films but in history.

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

I had an occasion to attend a seminar in Singapore with people from the Bombay film industry. One of the things I learned there was that in the future we will be able to see made-to-order films, which can be modified on demand as per our taste. You want to see a happy ending -- no problem -- press "happy ending;" or press "sad ending" or "more fighting" and so on. You want to see Devdas living happily ever after with Parbati as his wife; that is possible too. There will be several versions of the same movie. That future is now in Bangladesh -- not in films but in history. There are

many versions of the history of Bangladesh. Let us consider some of these versions.

BNP version

Bangladesh had been a colony for many years. Finally, in 1971, Major Zia wanted to free his countrymen and went to the Chittagong radio station to declare independence of Bangladesh. After a bloody war lasting 9 months the freedom fighters defeated the "hanadar bhabhi," (invading forces) and Bangladesh became independent.

At the time of the liberation war, while the freedom fighters fought, the political leaders were outside Bangladesh. Sheikh Mujib Rahman went to Pakistan and other political leaders went to India. Once Bangladesh became

independent India intervened and wanted to make Bangladesh a colony by putting Awami League in power. This failed hence Kissinger called Bangladesh a "bottomless basket."

The people of Bangladesh rejected that government and brought back Maj Gen Zia as their leader in 1975. President Ziaur Rahman gave Bangladesh multi-party democracy, and was assassinated in 1981. After the rule of Gen Ershad from 1982 to 1990 BNP returned to power again, and the rest is -- as they say -- history.

Now, to quote from a recent speech of Mrs. Zia: "one party (Awami League) is working for its foreign master and is trying to make Bangladesh their (Indian)

colony."

Pakistani version

Since 1947, when Pakistan became the homeland for the Muslims, India was forced to accept it but was conspiring to undo Pakistan. Taking the cue from India, misguided Bengalis challenged "Quaid-i-Azam" and wanted Bengali as a national language against his wishes. Awami League was working to undermine the integrity of Pakistan at an early stage.

Their leader Sheikh Mujib was part of "Agartala Conspiracy" for which he was charged with sedition. He was tried and jailed. In 1971, with Indian help, Awami League wanted to dismember Pakistan. Pakistani soldiers fought valiantly. Jamaat leader Gholam Azam said: "Sheikh Mujib and Awami League have betrayed the people by siding with India."

Mr Motiur Rahman Nizami said on August 23: "Those who wants to dismember Pakistan wants to destroy Islam." In August 1971 Pakistani President Yahya published a white paper blaming

Awami League for conspiring against Pakistan, and justified the military crackdown of March 25 as a preemptive strike to foil the conspiracy against the integrity of Pakistan.

Professor Rushbrook Williams of Oxford also criticized India and Awami League in his book, which was largely based on that white paper. In December 1971, according to Nizami, there was a conspiracy and Yahya Khan, then president of Pakistan, surrendered. If Nizami had been left to his own devices -- as he claimed many years later -- he would have taken over Kolkata. It is because of international conspiracy that India could dismember Pakistan and make Sheikh Mujib the leader of Bangladesh.

My version

The people of East Bengal joined Pakistan with high hopes that turned into frustration as they were constantly exploited, and their culture was undermined. The language movement was the beginning of their aspirations to live by their language and culture. The Punjabi ruling

class was unwilling to share power and national income.

Awami League launched a movement for regional autonomy, and democratic rights of the people of East Bengal. In the 1970 elections Awami League won 167 of 169 seats. Yahya Khan called Sheikh Mujib the future prime minister of Pakistan. On March 1, the National Assembly session was suddenly postponed indefinitely. Sheikh Mujib gave a statement at Purbani Hotel declaring non-cooperation. On March 7 he gave a fiery speech at the racecourse where, among other things, he said: "Ebarer sangram sadhinotar sangram."

On March 25 the Pakistan army attacked civilians, Dhaka University, the EPR and the police to crush this movement and to restore "law and order." On the night of March 25-26 Sheikh Mujib was arrested and taken to Pakistan and was thrown into jail. The liberation war began.

Various units of the Bengal Regiment and the EPR rebelled.

Major Zia went to Chittagong radio station and read an announcement on March 27 which said: "I Major Zia on behalf of Bangladesh Sheik Mujib Rahman do hereby proclaim the independence of Bangladesh." The Mukti Bahini was organized under Awami League, and Colonel Osmany was made the Commander-in-chief under whom there were 11 sector commanders. Indian soldiers trained, supported and fought alongside the Mukti Bahini. India hosted 9 million refugees who crossed the border during this time.

In international politics US was supporting Pakistan. US Under-Secretary of State Alexis Johnson, in a Washington Special Action Group meeting on December 6, made the prognosis: "Bangladesh will be an international basket case." To which Kissinger added: "It will not necessarily be our basket case."

India signed a treaty with USSR and finally got directly involved. Pakistan attacked India on December 3, 1971 to internationalize the crisis. India retaliated.

Now, good readers, judge which version sounds more credible. If you do not like my version, then simply rewind and press "BNP" or "Pakistani" version.

Habibul Haque Khondker is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.