

Kofi Annan's concern

It reflects what everyone feels

WHEN UN Secretary General Kofi Annan urges the Bangladesh caretaker government (CG) to ensure a level playing field for all and calls on the Bangladesh army to play a neutral role during election, it reflects the general concern of the international community at the unwholesome state of politics in the country at the moment.

Mr. Annan also expressed anxiety over pre-election violence, a phenomenon that gets widespread coverage in the international media, and hoped that all political parties would make necessary compromise to ensure a peaceful and transparent electoral environment.

From the statement of the outgoing UN Secretary General, it becomes quite apparent that the doings and undoings of the CG since assuming power have been so blatantly evident that our international development partners deemed it as a call of conscience to come up with some friendly advice. We believe his statement was built on the report submitted by a senior UN official who had visited the country last month and had held meetings with political leaders of all denomination.

Kofi Annan's counsel to the CG for creating a level playing field for all the players in the ensuing election coincides with what the people in Bangladesh have been thinking all along since the four-party alliance government stepped down at the end of its term. With democracy having tremendous prospects to flourish in Bangladesh where a multi-party democratic system is already in place, the call from the experienced UN chief should be taken with due seriousness by the CG, especially by the chief adviser of the caretaker government. It is more because of his inept handling of the affairs of the CG from the very outset that doubts in the minds of all, at home and abroad, have found root. With some damaging, whimsical and unilateral decisions chief adviser cum President Iajuddin Ahmed has made the CG controversial. The resignation of the four competent advisers and deployment of the army were two last nails in the coffin. While the CG has been doing more damage than damage control, we have no option left but to keep on worrying about the fate of the election.

We hope this time around a good advice will not fall on deaf ear what with so many advisers still around in the CG. And when it comes from a friend of Bangladesh we should actually welcome it without any hesitation.

Brickfield emissions-threat to ecology

Authorities turn blind eyes to violators

BICKFIELD emissions have long been polluting the environment all over the country. There has been a continuous rise in brickfields due to the growing construction boom that has increased the demands of bricks. A media report has now confirmed that there has been illegal proliferation of brickfields at Khagrachari in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). It is shocking to learn that as many as 44 brickfields, covering eight upazillas of the CHT alone, use as much as 20 crore maunds of firewood per year.

These brickfields are not only polluting the surrounding environment but also having adverse effects on the agriculture of the region. Besides, these fields that are wood-fired are also depleting the forest resources of the country apart from emitting very harmful gases. These obnoxious and harmful emissions are hampering fruit bearing trees around the brickfields.

Over the years the media had been reporting about the havoc the brickfields are causing to our environment, yet there is no sign of respite in the heinous act. We are simply appalled by this continuous harm to the environment as well as denudation of the forests.

It is no secret that these brickfields of the Hill Tracts operate using firewood whereas there exists a statutory law that states that only coal should be used for the purpose. But it is disconcerting that the brickfield owners continue to violate the rule since the authorities concerned turn a blind eye to the violators. Not only that, it is shocking to note, as stated by an officer of the Department of Environment and Forests, that of the 44 brickfields only two have valid license and other related documents. It is alleged that these brickfield owners continue with their operations without the help of the unscrupulous government officers.

We strongly urge the government to put a stop to these corrupt traders and their heinous acts in order to save both our forests resources and environment, failing which there may be a local ecological disaster. The matter must be comprehensively and decisively dealt with, here and now.

Election 2007: The question of level playing field



M ABDUL HAFIZ

PERSPECTIVES

In the meantime, the electoral preparation of all political parties, except BNP-Jamaat combine, is in shambles. Under the circumstances, if the AL-led 14-party alliance, as well as other political outfits, participate in the election as per the schedule already declared they will obviously not find the playing field level. There's no point playing the game only to give legitimacy to the BNP-Jamaat game plan and a fresh boost to "nationalist" bankrupt politics.

IVEN the fact that many issues are yet to be resolved to ensure a level playing field for the contestants for the upcoming election - doubts abound as to the fate of the election itself. A growing number of people are wondering if those issues can at all be addressed, consensual decisions arrived at, and the election held within the stipulated time-frame of ninety days -- a constitutional binding. They are doubtful of the possibility because the caretaker government tasked with the job is headed by a person responsible for the catalysis of some of the issues.

The core of the problem is wide-spread public scepticism that Professor Iajuddin, the head of the caretaker government -- known for his predilection for the party he belongs to -- can faithfully oversee a crucial election which has already brought the rival political groups to the point of violent clashing.

That he is neither fair nor neutral is amply demonstrated through his activities during the last six or so weeks of his stewardship, turning Bangabhaban almost into a hub of conspiracies to promote the agenda of the previous government. For it was this alliance that not only made him president, but also manipulated things to unconstitutionally install him as the head of the interim government.

In the beginning, even if there was a flicker of hope about the neutrality of the learned professor, the way things unraveled later left no one in doubt that he was "a cuckoo in the nest" as far as the office of the caretaker government was concerned. He resorted to tricks and subterfuges as soon as the interim government was sworn in, with ten advisers to assist him.

But he felt more comfortable acting unilaterally, although at times he sat with the advisers as a matter of ceremony. But the decisions were his, and his alone. He was the ultimate arbiter of each and every thing -- a fact that gave him enough leeway to work at the behest of his employer.

He did it with the enormous powers he was endowed with as

president, chief executive, supreme commander of the armed forces, as well as head of a dozen or so ministries and departments. He complied with all the requirements of BNP-Jamaat combine, whether they were in the administration, Election Commission, and even the judiciary. Look at the promptness with which the cases against Ershad were revived after a long hiatus. It was certainly not to dispense justice. It was fraught with political motives.

The climax of the drama surrounding BNP-Jamaat's end-game with regard to a doctored election, the breaking of the strained relationship between Professor Iajuddin and his council of advisers, came when the president took the decision to employ the armed forces disregarding the collective dissent of the latter. It was a severe blow to an already delicate situation that was prevailing in the country -- adversely affecting the environment for free and fair election, and more importantly the public psyche. More so when there was no convincing reason to do so.

As a result when the president delivered a late night speech, it again conjured up the spectacle of a president in BNP-Jamaat hue. It wasn't surprising that his speech sounded as if it was the ghost voice of one of the volatile BNP stalwarts -- both in content and semantics. In a quick riposte, the four advisers engaged in finding a solution with regard to level playing ground resigned in disgust. When the whole nation was aghast at the development, it seemed to have come as a relief to the president who lost no time in filling up the vacant posts. The message of the whole episode -- a crisis of confidence -- was apparently lost on him.

It is time for BNP-Jamaat's game plan to be put in action now, without any encumbrance. Even if the playing field is yet to be leveled, both BNP-Jamaat and Professor Iajuddin have suddenly gone constitutional by demanding holding of the election within ninety days, and are shedding crocodile tears over the sanctity of the Constitution.

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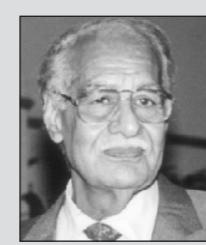
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Iajuddin who, in collusion with BNP, occupied the post of the head of the caretaker government in a questionable way, and in violation of the constitutional provisions. Ever since, his function in that post had been essentially an exercise in megalomania. He destroyed the environment for free and fair elections, to which he himself is the main impediment.

In the meantime, the electoral preparation of all political parties,

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISL.

An Indian viewpoint

KULDIP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

BETWEEN THE LINES

Interest by India could have changed the perspective to some extent. But its ignorance about Bangladesh is appalling. Indian media hardly covers anything with sympathy and understanding. The reporting is like that of the Western press about South Asia, full of preconceived notions. Here is New Delhi, which once helped freedom-loving Bangladeshi to liberate themselves from the distant rule of Islamabad. It is the same New Delhi which seems to think that Bangladesh is a gone case, lost to fundamentalism and ISI machinations.

OI Bangla was the slogan that resounded in the streets of Dhaka and outside this month 35 years ago. Once again the same slogan reverberates all over. Then it was a war cry for liberation from West Pakistan and it exuded optimism and exuberance. This time it is for holding free, fair elections and arouses pessimism and anxiety.

Those days one call from Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rahman, the father of the nation, made people surrender arms which they carried freely. Today, uncertainty has gripped people and they want to possess arms. Yet they are worried over security as an untoward stream of passion runs through the streets.

The scene is, however, familiar. It is the same old confrontation between the liberation and the anti-liberation forces. It takes different shapes at different times and erupts occasionally without rhyme or reason. Yet the basic characteristics remain the same.

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ever, refused to get involved. Their problem is not only the possible opposition which they might meet, but what they do after stepping in. They have refused several requests to come in. Only recently did they say no to intervene to enforce peace.

Bangladesh has not yet been able to reconcile the differences between the two. They are at war against each other all the time in every facet of life. The anti-liberation forces do not regret the formation of Bangladesh, nor do they want any dilution in its sovereignty. But they tend to tilt towards Pakistan and find themselves more at home with the military than the democratic wherewithal. The pro-liberation elements are generally pro-India and strongly oppose even any indirect say of the armed forces in governance.

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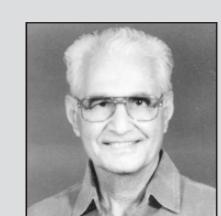
substantially there when the Sheikh was in power. But he was so tall and so popular that even the non-liberators had to get into the clothes of liberators. The Sheikh was conscious of that and he, therefore, merged all political parties into one, not to give space to the anti-liberation elements. He earned the title of dictator. But he did not care. He should have dealt with the anti-liberation forces severely. Since nobody raised voice against the Sheikh, he believed that there was no other voice. The anti-liberators only bade their time. They killed him and gradually penetrated the society in connivance with the military dictators of the day.

They are now emboldened, particularly when the BNP uses them as their foot soldiers. The support of the Jamaat-e-Islami was always there. Being part of the Khaleda government, the party has exploited the position to the hilt to spread fanaticism. Liberal Bangladeshi have been pushed to the background. Extremists are ruling the roost. Yet secular forces are beginning to assert themselves. They are somewhat late and still lack coherence. But they at least know the stakes. If the anti-liberation forces manage to control the government, democracy will receive a severe blow and face a bleak future in Bangladesh.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

A Pakistani viewpoint

PLAIN WORDS

M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

Pakistan has not known democracy due to too much intrusion of religious shibboleths into politics -- all of this to make dictatorships acceptable. When religious leaders, Ulema, have stayed quiet, dictators have expounded Islamic-seeming ideas that rejected rule of law, human rights, and representative governments or democracy. Bangladeshis should learn lessons from Pakistan politics and beware.

lating elections through force or fraud.

When a Pakistani scribe looks at the Bangladeshi scene today, he becomes frightened. Going by his own country's standards, the situation seems to be ripe for a serious blow to democracy.

What is scary about Bangladesh is the ideological basis of this polarization. Differences between AL and BNP should not be trivialized as a quarrel between two women leaders. AL, as one assesses, is a legatee of Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rahman's unabashed secular Bengali Nationalism and his concept of socialist policies for Bangladesh.

On the other hand, BNP is actually a legatee of Muslim League of yore that believed in Muslim Nationalism with conservative politics and an outlook to

go with it; it does not seem to have any specific economic ideas of its own. BNP intensely dislikes secularism and taunts AL of being India-leaning. AL leadership, no less Muslim than others, takes its stand by the love for Bengali language, literature, culture, and the demography of Bangladesh.

While Islamic character of BNP, as a successor of Muslim League, entirely negates what the Indian Congress used to stand for: a common secular Indian culture and nationalism based on Indo-Persian civilization. BNP now amends Jinnah's Two Nation theory to Three Nations Theory, with the third, Bangladesh Muslim Nationalism, having been heightened by working together with those who are presumed to be working for a purely Islamic dispensation, presided over by a Caliph. BNP's allies, Islamic

Most Ulema in Pakistan agreed

with dictator General Ziaul Haq that a western-style democracy is quite un-Islamic. They happily agreed that he should have a nominated assembly to advise him. That was the Islamist politics in Pakistan and they shared power with the dictator: Gen Zia.

What Islamists today demand is a Caliphate. What the latter will be like is now known: Mullah Mohammad Omar had established his Caliphate in Kabul after 1996 that was accepted as genuinely Islamic by all orthodox Sunni Ulema of Deobandi school, including the leading lights of Deobandi's Darul Uloom, itself who while visiting Pakistan during the diamond jubilee of the Darul Uloom, clearly and unequivocally endorsed Mulla Omar as the true Islamic Caliph -- with the clear understanding that all Muslims everywhere have to accept him as the legitimate religious, political, economic, and military head of all Muslims.

In Pakistan this controversy has remained undecided. Most of Ulema had voted for all powers to Gen Pervez Musharraf by amending the Constitution so that he can dismiss all the elected Assemblies and governments responsible to them at his discretion. And, mind you, Musharraf preaches 'enlightened moderation' and a 'modernist' Islam in place of old orthodoxy. Orthodoxy versus Modern and Moderate Islam is a controversy common to all Muslim societies; what divides the two sides is the use of rational judgement by individuals: orthodox deny the right to use one's own reasoning while the enlightened depend on it.

Such an ideological clash as underlies the polarization in Bangladesh can lead to unending clashes and possibly even to civil war. The 1947 upheaval was secular politics versus its religion-driven rejection by communal politics, in which not only was India partitioned but hundreds of thousands were killed and more than 1.5 crore people were displaced. It remains history's largest ethnic cleansing so far.

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There is now an urgent need for subjecting Islamists to close scrutiny. What is being sold today as Islamic politics is a hoax on Islam. No matter how long are the beards of some pious-looking politicians, all politics is about the social life here on earth, and thus secular. At no point does Islam recognize any Church or a clergy. Neither have Allah in the Quran, nor the sayings of the Prophet, laid down the constitutional principles of running a state nor do they adumbrate a political philosophy.

Islam is all about fear of God, piety, and good moral behaviour. All it says on political matters is to consult one another in solving your problems -- and one interprets it as simple democracy, unadorned with adjectives. At any rate, these divine sources nowhere command people to set up this or that kind of Caliphate; or who or how a Caliph is to be chosen and what qualifications he should have. People have to know their requirement and use their rational judgment. That is secular politics.

Look closely. What Mullah Omar did in Kabul was to set up his dictatorship. We all know what

he did to women, to minorities, to foreigners -- and to Pakistani footballers (for the crime of wearing shorts during a match they were hauled up for obscenity by Taliban's religious police). Taliban found many-centuries-old Buddha statues in Bamiyan offensive to their Islamic sensitivities and they blasted them away.

Look more closely. It was a dictatorship, a very secular thing, that gave no rights to his Muslim brethren and sisters and instead imposed the duty of obeying him unquestionably. This dictatorship may have been set up by a pious man. But he was not told by God to do so; his action was a politically-motivated secular act. Insofar as Mullah Omar's edicts were treated as religious duties, it was fascism of a kind worse than Hitler's.

Since Muslims now have over a hundred "true" Islams, as each sect claims to be, they will never agree on a single Caliph. No matter how many Caliphs proclaim their divine status, not all Islamic groups will ever recognize any one of them. This is a prescription for unending strife and wars among Muslim states.

MB Naqvi is a leading Pakistani columnist.