

Election finally

Sensible move by 14-party alliance

IT is a matter of great satisfaction that the 14-party alliance has decided to participate in the election, at last. It must come as a great relief for all our countrymen since a dark cloud of uncertainty has been removed from the horizon, an uncertainty that was fraught with all the imponderables, had there been an election without a major party participating. However, one wishes that it had not taken so many days and so much of hassle for the people to go through, for the alliance to make up its mind. All the players in our election process must be held responsible for what the country had to go through in particular since the caretaker government (CTG) took over.

Now that we have all the major parties ready to participate in the election, it is now up to the CTG and the Election Commission (EC) to deliver a free, fair and peaceful election. The government must ensure that peace and harmony prevail in the country in the run up to the election, of which there are but a few weeks left; and given the little time left for the polling day, one can expect to see a very intensive electioneering all over the country. Therefore, not only in the days preceding the election, the country would like to see a completely violence free election day also.

We feel that two most important tasks of the EC have not been fulfilled yet. The voter list remains the most central issue. The two major lacunae in it, that of excess voters and of genuine voters being left out, have not been satisfactorily addressed; at least we have no way of ascertaining this since the latest corrected and updated list has not been displayed for the public to verify its accuracy.

Another onerous task for the EC is to ensure that people with dubious background and having questionable credentials, including black money holders, cannot seek election. It can be ensured only if the existing criteria are applied in the most stringent manner in vetting the nomination papers.

We would like to make it clear that in our constant effort to have the best and the untainted as our representatives in the parliament it will be our duty to expose all those corrupt, controversial and notorious candidates, which we as voters can do well without.

Parties stooped too low

They simply bargained at the cost of people

NOW that the major parties have decided to test their strength in the election, instead of continuing the murderous politics of confrontation, the question that arises is whether the end to the political crisis, that caused so much suffering to the people, could have been brought about a bit earlier or whether sincere attempts were made by the two major parties to resolve it quickly enough. Regrettably, neither side could show the concern for people in general which was expected of them.

Both the parties played tricks with the nation in their bid to undermine each other. Nowhere in their scheme of ruthless bargaining did the people figure. To begin with, the BNP-led alliance was not willing to cede any space to the opposition. Politicisation of key institutions by the alliance has virtually rendered them ineffectual. The institutions that should remain above controversy are now vitiated by party politics, the highest judiciary being no exception.

The caretaker government, for its part, could not win the confidence of the 14-party alliance and many of its decisions were rejected. The political uncertainty persisted while the economy came under tremendous strain. It was easy for the caretaker government and the BNP to blame the AL-led alliance for the hartals and blockades, which severely disrupted life. But the caretaker government had the legal and moral responsibility to keep the country on the right track.

The Awami League's handling of the political situation also came as a rude shock to people. The party started with a long list of demands that it had prepared after extensive discussions and brain-storming, but finally it could do no better than identifying some individuals and pressed for their removal while no substantive change took place in the existing system. Its only weapon was hartal which was finally sharpened with the idea of blockade that paralysed the country and caused colossal damage to the economy. And more than 70 lives have been lost in political violence in the last two months.

We are, unfortunately, forced to conclude that the nation has been taken for a ride by the political parties.

Outsourcing free and fair election



DR. ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

No NONSENSE

Outsourcing refers to the delegation of non-core operations from internal production to an external entity specializing in the management of that operation. In the context of FAFE, the external entities will do the production and service by bringing their expertise to the recipient country. There are many Bangladeshi-born US and Canadian citizens who have no vested interest in politics, but would be willing to serve their country of birth if called upon to do so.

that:

- What is good for a Free and Fair Election (FAFE) is ominous for BJA.
- The more conducive the environment becomes for a FAFE, the bleaker the prospects for recapturing the PMO by BJA.
- The longer the elections are delayed the more depoliticisation takes effect, rendering BJA's election machinations weaker and weaker.
- The more the opposition parties press lajuddin for reforms, the more ineffective he becomes and the more he exposes himself as a BNP hack.

Delivering a keynote speech at a seminar titled "Democracy and Bangladesh" on December 17, US ambassador Patricia Butenis observed: "The essence of a caretaker government is impartiality. The credibility of the caretaker government depends on its acting in a visibly neutral and effective manner." She didn't hesitate to make the indictment that lajuddin did not always work neutrally.

The recent frenzied activities of the diplomats and foreign election observers have become exasperating to many citizens. People are cagily inquiring: Why are these aliens butting in so much in our domestic affairs? Are all these

hectic discourses and dialogues yielding anything?

The diplomats are taking an interest in our elections for various reasons. Ambassador Butenis articulated just about everything when she said: "It's no secret that the United States government takes a great interest in your upcoming election. And the reason is simple. Just about every issue that we care about that involves Bangladesh hinges on a successful election."

The upcoming election, and the government that will ensue, is not absolutely an internal affair of a country in an open economy global setting. There are many inextricable knots, dots and nested loops:

- Many of these foreign countries have a large population of Bangladeshi-born citizens whose family and friends still live there. When Ms. Butenis meets the leaders of the major parties she represents those of us living in the US (the same applies to other diplomats), regardless of our political affiliations.
- Politicians must not forget that the expatriates who remit nearly \$4 billion annually must have some voice in some form. Additionally, we visit the country

and spend millions more. Only a government installed by a free and fair election (FAFE) will enjoy our trust.

- The US embassy represents the US government and its citizens. The diplomats must make certain that our tax dollars, in loans and aid, produce the desired outcomes;
- Foreign firms invested billions (FDI) in Bangladesh. It is natural that their governments would want a business friendly and mutually beneficial democratic environment.
- Being a country of over 140 million people, Bangladesh offers its friends and development partners a growing market for their capital and consumer goods. A politically stable country with increasing gains in national income would ensure the realization of that market.

Only 54% of the respondents of a survey of 2,252 people (conducted from December 2004 to January 2005) claimed that the 2001 election was a FAFE. Certainly there was a strong perception of vote rigging, and the vote riggers misruled the country leading us to our current predicament. The siren song of power and perquisites was so mesmerizing that this time the BJA wanted it all through the deep

politicization of every government department they could get their hands in.

BJA's insistence that delaying the elections beyond 90 days would contravene the constitution is utterly fraudulent. Are they not the same people who made the CTG dysfunctional by transgressing the provisions of Article 58C of the constitution? Add to this lajuddin's blasé attitude with electoral reforms which squandered nearly 45 days.

The US and the EU had already forewarned nearly 10 months ago about the legitimacy issue, implying that if the election was illegitimate, the government that would follow would also be illegitimate, and would not get international recognition.

If the election is held with all the parties' consent but turned out to be anything but a FAFE, then the ensuing government must be declared illegitimate.

The World Bank, IMF, ADB and all other international agencies must withdraw all aid and loan packages until the illegitimate government is incapacitated. Foreign visas for vote-rigging politicians should be suspended until by-elections in questionable constituencies are consummated.

The whole world is watching the election impasse in Bangladesh. My friend Asif asked me: "Why don't you write a provocative piece for 'outsourcing' various aspects of governance so badly needed in Bangladesh?" His comments are not meant to be suggestive of anything but frustration; I thought the idea of proposing for outsourcing FAFE would be interesting, if not particularly pragmatic.

Outsourcing refers to the delegation of non-core operations from internal production to an external

entity specializing in the management of that operation. In the context of FAFE, the external entities will do the production and service by bringing their expertise to the recipient country. There are many Bangladeshi-born US and Canadian citizens who have no vested interest in politics, but would be willing to serve their country of birth if called upon to do so.

We seek foreign expertise in building big bridges, highways, underground mass transit systems, modernizing our railways, building sea ports, power plants, solving the murder of the ex-finance minister, and fighting terrorism – because they have the expertise. Aren't all these "mind your own business" internal affairs of our country too?

As noted above, foreign diplomats and election observers are swarming to the capital and calling on the CTG advisers, EC officials, and politicians. If nothing else, they are giving an impression that they are fully engaged in resolving the intricate issues. This is synonymous to outsourcing "resolutions" of our election related foibles to diplomats and foreign representatives free of charge.

One thing for sure, the country is benefiting from tourist revenues. In fact, the EC should ask for as many thousand election watchers as the foreign countries would be willing to provide. Why not even call for an international bid for outsourcing the conduct of a free and fair election for a billion dollars (to be paid by the bidders) for the experience of a life-time?

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The con in congruent



M J AKBAR

BYLINE

Hyde is the stick to Bush's carrot. But both are on the same side. Bush would certainly expect "political and material" support from India if he started military action against Iran. Don't underestimate the "material" part. India was not tested three years ago because Bush declared a premature victory. If there is another American "shock and awe" invasion, we will find out whether India is still independent or has become congruent.

including, sadly, media, immediately congratulated themselves on yet another "victory."

If the American president makes foreign policy, why did Bush need Congress approval of his deal with India? The president is head of the executive, and he certainly has much leeway in his management of government, but he is not above the Congress. If the Congress defines the parameters, then the president can only break them at the risk of impeachment.

The narrative of the Indo-US deal now has been bound with hard covers, and the covers are the Hyde Act. The July 18 agreement of 2005 is a limp document that may or may not be in the appendix. Bush has less than 25 months in office; the text of the Hyde Act, unless amended, will be in force long after Bush and this columnist are in their graves. Bush is an interlocutor; the Hyde Act is the lock that will seal the discourse for a generation if not more.

It is specious to suggest, as some in the Delhi government have done, that the Hyde Act is binding only on the United States. Isn't that the point? We did not do this deal to supply nuclear fuel to ourselves, did we? We did it to get American fuel and technology, and if the United States cannot give it because we are in violation of some aspect of Hyde's tough and unambiguous demands, then we are up a creek

without a paddle.

What are the main objectives of the Hyde Act? They are written in clean English. One stated objective is non-proliferation. It avers that as long as India is outside the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which we have not signed, it will remain a challenge to the "goals of non-proliferation." How does the Act propose to achieve this goal? By seeking to "halt the increase in nuclear weapons arsenals in South Asia and to promote their reduction and eventual elimination."

Halt, reduce and eliminate. Remember these three words. Those who insist that the deal is only about civilian nuclear energy are surely literate, and one presumes that they have imperatives that persuade them to gloss over such phrases. "The costs to the US appear minimal. The price India will have to pay may well be total loss of control over its future policies," MR Srinivasan, member of the Indian Atomic Energy Commission, told the December 21 issue of Science magazine.

The Hyde legislation calls for Indo-American cooperation between scientists to develop a common non-proliferation program – for the rest of the world, that is, not for America. America continues to exercise its right to test, and is working to build miniature nuclear weapons whose fallout can be contained, making them usable in

conventional war.

It may be of mild interest that if we agree to this deal, we will also be committing ourselves to the elimination of Pakistan's nuclear weapons along with ours. Perhaps optimists in Delhi believe that after he solves Kashmir, President Pervez Musharraf will discuss a nuclear-free South Asia, but somehow I doubt it.

If the first objective is corrosive, the second is colonial. It wants Indian foreign policy to be "congruent" to America's, and expects "greater political and material" support in the realisation of American goals. I doubt if during the talks, any Indian negotiator suggested that America might want to align itself with Indian foreign policy goals. That would be the language of equals, and this is an unequal relationship.

Sometimes the fog of peace is more dense than the fog of war, but there is a route map to guide us through to US strategy. It is a country called "Iran." "Congruence" is an untidy word with very neat implications. Bilateral agreements rarely, if ever, are third-country specific. Here is what the deal expects India to do vis-à-vis Iran: "full and active cooperation to dissuade, isolate and if necessary sanction and contain Iran."

The text asks India to keep in step with US policy on Iran, and quotes, approvingly, the votes by

India against Iran in the IAEA board of governors as evidence of such compliance. Iran is not the only country with which America has a problem about nuclear intentions. Iran does not have a weapon yet, although it is clearly making a serious effort to get one. North Korea has weapons. There is no specific linkage to North Korea. Why? One possible answer: Washington does not contemplate war with North Korea, but retains the option for an assault on Iran in 2007.

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Dedicated astrologers apart, everyone concedes that predictions are a speculative science. There is something about the end of a year, however, that makes such a temptation irresistible. The current language of defeat, or "neither winning nor losing," may have lulled us into the belief that Washington's military options are off the table. The Iraq Study Group, headed by as patrician a Republican as James Baker, a virtual uncle to George, has suggested that Washington starts talks with Damascus and Tehran, not war.

But there is a minority – and, I stress, speculative view – that a last-ditch desire to salvage a miracle out of the mess might tempt Bush, Tony Blair and Ehud Olmert into gambler's corner.

All three have tasted unexpected and even humiliating defeat this year, and have one chance before the triumvirate disintegrates with Blair's departure in early summer. Their fortunes might suddenly transcend if they were able to announce, at the end of a series of lightning strikes, that they had eliminated Iran's nuclear facilities.

There is also a technical reason, which all but a few experts have missed. The destruction of Iran's nuclear facilities would become too dangerous, apparently, after November, because the fallout would then reach Chernobyl levels.

I spoke to Dr Steven Wright, who presented a paper on this subject at a security conference in Geneva in the first week of December:

"Yes, there is indeed a technical issue at play which no one I have come across has picked up on. In essence, it is the loading of the Russian manufactured and supplied uranium fuel rods for the Bushehr reactor. Air strikes cannot be carried out after they have been loaded into the reactor due to the fallout being akin to Chernobyl. Therefore, they need to be carried out before that time, if at all.

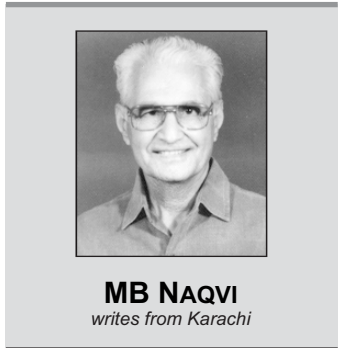
"The Bushehr reactor, despite being a light water reactor, still has a proliferation risk as the uranium rods can be removed a mere four months after loading and a crude plutonium weapon can be fashioned from it. There is a common myth that light water reactors are proliferation proof. If the objective is to prevent Iran from developing such a weapon, action would need to be carried out before this stage is reached."

There are many reasons why war should not happen. Bush, Blair and Olmert may want one, but their publics are disenchanted, and their legislatures more circumspect. The Pentagon is stretched taut, as are the British armed forces. The impact on oil prices, and the region, would be catastrophic.

But dreams of glory have this awkward ability to overwhelm common sense. It has happened before, in Iraq. India was not tested three years ago because Bush declared a premature victory. If there is another American "shock and awe" invasion, we will find out whether India is still independent or has become congruent.

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The Maulana has said it all



MAULANA Fazlur Rahman, chief of Jamiate Ulmai Islam and MMA's general secretary, has said that it is he who holds the key to peace in many areas: FATA, NWFP, Balochistan, and he seems to have had in mind, by implication, Afghanistan. He has asked President Pervez Musharraf to come and talk to him if he wants Islamabad's writ to run in FATA, NWFP and Balochistan.

The specific context was that the Maulana was stung by Musharraf's current election campaign: Musharraf wants to defeat the reactionary mullahs, and wants the moderate and modern Muslims to win. The Maulana appears to have

PLAIN WORDS

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taken umbrage to this terminology.

What he said clearly carried an implied threat: "Unless you make up with us your writ cannot run smoothly in the areas of our influence, and areas of Taliban influence are included in this." What he seems to be hinting at is: "Unless you revive the traditional military-mullah alliance and abide by it, you will be in difficulty; we will fight hard on the issue."

It is now clear to all that fighting on the planks of traditional Islam, and an ambiguous and unconvincing modern, moderate Islam will be an unequal fight in present conditions, certainly in NWFP and Balochistan. As for Afghanistan, the Taliban already have a great deal of territory under their near-control, and are optimistic about the future.

The Maulana was talking from a position of strength. He already has the provincial government of NWFP under his belt. He has nominated half the provincial government of Balochistan. He is really a partner with Musharraf in ruling the country. Keeping their alliance going, the Maulana implies, is in the interest of both.

The Maulana's internal position in the MMA is also relevant. He appears to be in conflict with Qazi Hussain Ahmed on the tactics to be adopted. Qazi Hussain Ahmed appears to believe that a raging and tearing agitation against Musharraf in the here and now can bring electoral victory to MMA as well as to JI. He appears to be very confident that

the army would eventually not crush the clergy to a degree that would be fatal for MMA's political position in NWFP and Balochistan. He could only be banking on some support from within the army.

The JUI chief seems to be more cautious, and is concerned that matters should not go out of hand, or the military-mullah alliance sundered. He is holding out an olive branch to the military and Musharraf both, and is concerned with preserving the political advantages that the JUI already has. Instead of wanting much more tomorrow, he wants to advance slowly but surely: first preserving what advantage he has and then, hopefully, to win more. The styles of the two Maulanas are different. But on the ultimate aim the

two are not much different. It is a good tactic, also, for one to be more strident and the other to appear more moderate and peace-seeking.

It is possible that Musharraf's aides may advise him to divide the MMA, the differences on tactics between the Maulana and Qazi Saheb can be skillfully exploited without fatally wounding the traditional understanding between the military and the clergy. For administrators, fixing things up is their forte; they tend to be value neutral. But the issue now posed by a thoroughly radicalized clergy, led increasingly by the likes of al-Qaeda and Taliban, is too intransigent. The issue between democracy and a medieval dictatorship of obscurantists, in the holy name of Islam, has to be resolved by letting the people decide rationally and freely.

Actually Musharraf is sandwiched between an increasingly strident America and Nato in Afghanistan, on the one hand, and the forces of Islamic militancy inside the country on the other. American moves are not really benign or benevolent toward Pakistan. They are becoming increasingly critical of Musharraf's compromises.

The latter's September 5 agreement with the elders of North

Waziristan is now increasingly being criticized by the western media as having encouraged the Taliban and al-Qaeda to keep Afghanistan burning to an extent that they are now seen as a winning force that looks like being able to, next year, force the Nato and American forces out of the country. Defeat stares Nato in the face in Afghanistan.

The Americans want Pakistan to pull their chestnuts out of the fire. But Musharraf has to worry that the Pakistan army's hold on FATA areas is becoming a subject of debate throughout the world. Can he keep these areas under his control? Or will they come under the Taliban's sway?

Let no one make a mistake. The Taliban are not generically different from both versions of the JUI and also, up to a point, Jamaate Islami in terms of aims. Orthodox Islamic militancy of the Deobandi school is what unites MMA with the Taliban. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban are now well adjusted to each other, and they cooperate. They have the same politics and their true strength should not be underrated.

Reviewing a parade of the smart Pakistan army may broaden the chest of the Commander momentarily; it is also not easy to visualize

that a rag-tag crowd of the Taliban would defeat it, or takeover from it. But the way their influence is spreading, and the uncertainties of the international situation, may put Pakistan's military in a difficult position. That needs to be avoided through diplomacy and politics.

Needless to say, Maulana Rahman's chief context is Pakistan politics. Conscious of his power in the two western provinces, the Maulana has to preserve this redoubt from the Q-League. Apart from the expectation of MMA making electoral advances in Punjab and Sindh, it has a deeper dimension. If things go wrong the potentialities of the issues involved include unending conflict and, possibly, a civil war. Like most civil wars, it is best avoided by politics. Not being advisors to the government or the general, it is for them to find political means that hopefully can avoid or, if necessary, to fight the menace effectively by political means.

Musharraf was certainly not the only addressee of Maulana Rahman. He was also addressing US President George Bush, his army and America's actives allies: "If you want an honourable and orderly retreat from Afghanistan come and talk to us. We will arrange negotia-

tions between you and the Taliban. You are not likely to win in Afghanistan. Eventually you will lose. Why not withdraw in an orderly manner. We will make it honourable for you through a political pact."

It is unlikely that President Bush will sue for peace just yet. It is more likely that he will concentrate on putting more pressure on the embattled Pakistan president to do more. The Americans have spent a lot in supporting Musharraf and shoring up Pakistan's economy. They expect a return: the Pakistan army pulling their chestnuts out of the Afghan fire.

One is not too sure which way American thinking will move now. Faced with the uncertainties of the Afghan war how will Bush amend his geo-political aims? Will he be able to create a new bipartisan consensus in America on the future aim of the Afghanistan campaign? Much hangs on that. All that is uncertain. But, for the short-term, Islamabad should expect increased pressure from America and the Nato countries.

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