Time for Plan B?

With the country running out of political options, many are looking hopefully towards the military for a solution. Farid Bakht explores how this would only make matters worse



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IT is time we considered the possibility of the military taking over the country. Avoiding this is like sticking one's head in the sand. It is no use pretending that democratic elections will take place with a smooth unchallenged handover of power. We have a dysfunctional democracy, where two or three groups of greedy politicians vie with external and dubious internal forces to buy seats, promise the earth, and deliver nothing. Politics has become a business to print money.

They merely wish to enjoy the ceremony of "appearing" to have power, knowing full well that it lies mainly in the foreign parts of Gulshan and Baridhara.

These "democrats" are fast burying democracy. Betting on the 1996 model of a flawed election to be followed by a normal election, they are planning take it to the wire and come out triumphant winners in the summer.

Do the opposition not realize that the BNP may have learnt from that debacle? Of course they do. You may ask, then, why are they making so many mistakes? Two months of chaos, followed by a sudden decision to participate in elections, then to enter a pact with hard-line Islamists, and then to withdraw -- apparently in solidarity with an ex-military dictator.

Meanwhile, the BNP and Jamaat raise the ante and play their part in the funeral of democracy.

Even if reasonable elections occur later in 2007, enough to be rubber-stamped by the US and Europeans, can you imagine any lasting stability? How long can that regime last? A few months, perhaps. A couple of years?

The next regime will be threatened by similar forces in evidence in 2004 and 2005. That means bombings, killings, and instability.

Whether the military comes in before, during, or two years after the election(s), there is a sense of inevitability that they will take centre-stage in politics.

Already, we have seen a temporary "Operation Clean Heart" intervention in 2002 and the now permanent presence of the Rapid Action Battalion -- 8,500 elite troops on an execution mission -- targeting mainly underground Leftist guerrillas.

Plans A & B

People better placed than I feel that a military coup is a remote possibility. They smile knowingly because they have received assurances from a couple of embassies that there are no plans to engage with the military. That the agencies still want democracy to "flourish" in this model/moderateIslamic/secular republic. When the chips are down, those "ideals" are discarded. Think Thailand, Turkey, and Algeria. Did I forget to mention Pakistan?

Plan A is for two similar ideologically-challenged political parties to contest and allow the winning side to enjoy themselves for a few years and once satiated to give the other mob a chance to earn some.

Meanwhile, the real business of government is conducted elsewhere. This means policy and strategy formulation, backed by money, remain in the hands of aid agencies. The bureaucracy is supposed to implement those policies, enabling business to function. This extends to a posse of multi-nationals waiting to weld together some gas pipelines, dig up coal, sell telephones, and clean up in the banking sector.

A new middle class is expected to work as professionals and retailers, enjoying the ride, thus becoming a bastion of support for their new-found prosperity. The remainder (the 120 million without mobile phones, fridges, and credit cards) are to get on quietly, without making a fuss.

The first part of Plan A isn't working. The politicians haven't fully understood the rules. They keep trying to cheat. When you throw a dice and it turns up as 3, you cannot move 5 spaces on your Ludo board. It leads to chaos or where we are today. They also cannot seem to do all the great things they have promised. They cannot export gas to India.