

Grand alliance's poll boycott

Uncertainty stares us in the face

THE decision of the grand alliance -- announced by Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina yesterday -- to boycott the January 22 parliamentary election has created great political uncertainty. We are saddened by the development and worried as to its outcome.

The year 2006 ended on an optimistic note as the prospects of an election, with participation of all the major parties, looked bright. But now things are almost back to square one. The grand alliance has already announced a two-day siege program, which is likely to lead to the same political turmoil that caused so much dislocation to life in the last two months.

The political stalemate that persisted for so long, now sinks to a deeper level. In our view, all the parties have contributed to the process. The BNP's game plan was to test its rivals' patience and resilience on controversial issues, which the AL and its allies could not allow to go unchallenged. BNP was more interested in the letter of the Constitution rather than its spirit, which not only called for an election but also a free and fair one.

The caretaker government, which had the primary responsibility of resolving the crisis faltered at the very outset, and it failed to prove its neutrality to the AL and its allies. Its actions have since been viewed with great suspicion by all the parties except Jamaat-BNP, and an early end to the political crisis was never in sight.

The AL, unable from the beginning to come to terms with the flaws in the voter list and the fallout of wholesale politicization of some vitally important institutions, could have articulated its demands much earlier to avoid the long-drawn political tug of war. It put forward one demand after another, thus making the task of reaching a consensus all the more difficult.

We now enter a very troublesome and uncertain phase in our political life, with hartals and other disruptive programmes staring us in the face. We once again appeal to both the alliances to rethink their politics.

Obviously, people's hopes and aspirations are not reflected in the present state of affairs. And how long can they repose their faith in the parties that cannot even agree to go to polls for keeping the democratic process alive?

A fuel crunch out of the blue

Govt needs to look into the matter and fix responsibility

ALTHOUGH the closure of the oil companies' fuel supply depots for five days since December 29 officially ended on January 2, the chain impact it has had on the economy cannot be sloughed off so easily. In fact, this should form a subject matter of an immediate inquiry from the energy ministry. Transport, business, agriculture suffered intensely. In particular, the raw hide business during Eid-ul-Azha received a jolt because of the unforeseen transport problems.

While the supply of fuels should have been actually smoother during peak time Eid mobilities, it was the exact opposite that took place. To make matters worse, supply disruption occurred without any prior notice. We are constrained to say that there was either lack of planning or a deliberate attempt to create an artificial crisis with many raring in the wings to skim the cream in the black market.

But we have it on the authority of the president of Sylhet Division Petroleum Dealers, Agents and Distributors' Association that because of poor storage of Padma and Jamuna oil depots in Sylhet, the oil supply had almost come to a standstill sometime ago, so that there was an early warning of sorts. Nobody was apparently there to take the signal and do something positive about it. The question, therefore, arises as to what the BPC, the monopoly importer of fuel in the country has been doing to ensure that the supply line didn't face a crunch? Why did the storage capacity of Padma and Jamuna oil companies not improve in keeping with the increase in demands? Since the petrol pumps do not have the capacity to store five days' worth of petroleum products the stoppage of supply from the main depots evidently precipitated the crisis. On whose orders? The public have a right to know.

Will the energy ministry come out with a statement on the issue in a bid to allay public misgivings that must have arisen due to the unanticipated fuel crunch?

Flirting with bigots: BNP vs AL

NO NONSENSE

Note that the distributions of seats in the boxes are constructed to make the point that flirting with the bigots is a natural political expediency. Both AL and BNP will continue to be allied with bigots for the foreseeable future (Box-4), and both will yield to their nagging demands to get religious cover. This being the fait accompli, what we can do, though, is enlighten the bigots through intellectual discourse.

BNP AL Electoral Gain Matrix under a free and fair election

		Box -1		Box - 2
AL	:	140 seats		150 seats
BNP	:	140 seats		135 seats
Others	:	20 seats		15 seats
AL + No Bigots	:	135 seats		Box - 4
BNP + Bigots	:	150 seats		145 seats
Others	:	15 seats		10 seats

The numbers in the boxes are of hypothetical construct

Much recent scholarly Islamic literature argues that: "The doctrine that religion and politics can't be separated in Islam is a later historical construct, rather than the Qur'anic doctrine. It is a human construct, rather than the Qur'anic doctrine. It is human construct rather than a divine revelation."

If it is well intentioned then why is no one, other than the BNP-Jamaat alliance (BJA), rejoicing with champagne and caviar?

Instead of defending this action time and again, the AL leadership should have scrapped the MOU forthwith and apologized for its misadventure. The minorities spent many sleepless nights in fear because of the intimidation during BNP-Jamaat's five years of repressive rule, and looked towards the AL leadership for relief from their nightmare -- only to be slapped squarely at the end.

At a time when the world is striving for the harmonious coexistence of different faiths, our politicians are turning the clock back to the dark days of rule by scripture.

With the exception of Turkey and Malaysia, the Muslim majority countries of the world lack a history of democratic struggles of the people; many of these nations are still preserving their feudal past. Therefore, one shouldn't look for causes exclusively in religious teachings, but also in the socio-political history and family lineage of the people of those countries.

Furthermore, most of these countries have very small religious minorities, and they, too, have historically accepted the religious hegemony of Islam.

But there is strong pressure mounting, and human rights movements are up-and-coming in all these countries. In these countries globalization may not be desirable,

Awami League, fatwa and our self-esteem

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GROUND REALITIES

It may be that the Awami League will own up to its mistake. It may even be that it will, under pressure from its followers, repudiate the deal with the Khelafat Majlish. The damage, though, has been done. And all secular Bengalis have felt diminished by this assault on their self-esteem.

today is about winning power. Nothing else matters.

And yet the Awami League, in all its long history, has been a much more substantive affair than attaining power. It has, in the course of modern Bengali history, been a proper vehicle for a propagation of secular democratic ideals. When it jettisoned its communal skin in the 1950s, it sent out the powerful message that it was inaugurating a fresh, new, necessarily liberal trend in the politics of Pakistan.

It was such ideals that eventually carried Bengalis through to a spirited movement for autonomy, and then to political and geographical sovereignty as a nation. It is this heritage of the Awami League which has now been put at risk through that notorious deal with the Khelafat Majlish.

There are some terribly bad holes in the Awami League argument that the right of "fatwa," which it has so cheerfully handed over to the Khelafat Majlish, will be exercised by "alems," clerics possessed of profound religious knowledge. The holes are too big not to be noticed.

In the first place, a "fatwa," or

religious decree, in these days of modern political sensibilities runs counter to the principle of law, to due process of law. There is the very real probability of the "fatwa," if the fourteen-party alliance wins the election, taking the place of the universally accepted pattern of rule of law, particularly in the villages, and thereby ensuring the rise of a parallel system of justice in the land.

We in Bangladesh certainly do not have tribal laws in operation, behaviour that is preponderant in large areas of Pakistan. But when you decide that clerics can dispense "fatwa" you are telling the country, in so many words, that the possibility of the law and human rights being undermined in the villages and small towns of Bangladesh is about to become pretty real.

In the second place, despite everything that the Awami League might say about the "fatwa" being decided upon and imposed by clerics conversant with Islamic law, the truth is somewhat a little uglier than that: imposing religious edicts on a populace in a modern political dispensation is a clear attempt at a

revival of medievalism. It is a point that the Awami League seem not to have remembered.

The result is all the fear, all those worries which we now have before us. There are all the women who, in the rural regions, have, of late, made contributions to their family's economic welfare through employment with, or sponsorship of, non-governmental organizations. Once the "fatwa" becomes an officially sanctioned instrument of operation, it is these women, their futures, that will come under a huge, increasingly darker shadow.

And that is not all. The Awami League's deal with the Khelafat Majlish comes underpinned by the pledge not to allow any criticism of, or derogatory remarks about, the Prophet of Islam. Any individual who understands history, or has climbed the peaks of urbanity, will do nothing that can humiliate a religion or undermine a great religious icon.

But in a society where the level of ignorance remains abysmally high, and where the tendency to intimidate in the name of religion is yet a potent factor of life, the "fatwa" can

Year end jottings

BYLINE

M J AKBAR

Some odds and ends from a jumble of books picked up during a year's rummage of bookshops. Opening thought: can any piece of information be totally useless? The emphatic answer is no.

identity for the new faith? That answer will come, hopefully, from next year's reading list.

There isn't that much difference between Plato's ideal society and the Hindu caste system. In both, a rigid hierarchy keeps society stable and every man in his place. The four Greek divisions are sage, warrior, trader and menial, a precise mirror of brahman, kshatriya, vaisya and dalit. In Plato, property does not change hands; a class of wealth, rooted in land has been the norm rather than the exception till Marx smashed the class ceiling. The fatal flaw in perfectionist Plato is the ban on anything new, even in poetry and music. Old is romantic; new is growth rate.

Which city was the real capital of the British Raj? There was no confusion in the East India Company days: Calcutta. But once the north came under Sahib sway, the government spent seven months in cool Simla and only five

in Calcutta. The choice of Delhi, far closer to Simla, was announced in 1911 during the visit of King George V and Queen Mary; the new capital would be a symbol of imperial power and British superiority, another Constantinople or Rome, designed in the "Grand Manner."

A debate arose over whether the look should be "Indo-Saracenic," Mughal, Rajput, or Renaissance classic. The much-vaunted Sir Edwin Landseer Lutyens dismissed Indian architecture as "cumbersome, poorly coordinated and tiresome." Hindu architecture was "venered jointry" and the domes of Delhi's mosques were mere turnips. The viceroys, Lord Hardinge, thought such sentiments a bit thick, given that the bill for British grandeur was paid by India. Herbert Baker, Lutyens' less famous colleague, touched up New Delhi's pillars with lotuses, cobras, elephants, bulls and bells.

A useful thought from Kipling for

- After victory in 1857, the British army decided that all gunners would be British.
- Sir Robert Montgomery, lieutenant governor of Punjab during the uprising, thought John Lawrence, victor of Delhi, was an old woman because Lawrence had not razed the Jama Masjid to the ground.
- Sir Alfred Lyall, one of Montgomery's successors in Punjab, noted, ruefully: "One thing is sure; the natives all discuss our rule as a transitory state."
- Shiva cannot be defeated because he is god of destruction as well as the phallus.

Charles Goodyear, impoverished and manic, created vulcanised rubber by accident when, after years of experiments, he dropped sulphur on India rubber. So did he become a tycoon overnight? No. His patent was stolen by better, if unscrupulous, businessmen. Goodyear never owned any part of the company that still bears his name. Tycoon, by the way, is an American word of Japanese origin, from taikun, or military chief.

Flynt Leverett, former senior director for Middle East affairs at the American National Security Council and senior fellow at Brookings Institution's Saban Center for Middle East Policy, wrote

purposes, of course. Saudi Arabia was also beginning to see the merits of "peaceful" nuclear energy.

You agree with this old Arab proverb: In every head there is some wisdom? Prince Charles, patron of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, quoted the proverb in a lecture on "Islam and the West" at the Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford on October 27, 1993, a copy of which was given to me thirteen years after the event by Dr Farhan Nizami, who chairs the centre and is nurturing it into a wonderful institution.

The prince, of course, was being modest, British, self-deprecatory. But is the subject, theme of a million seminars long before 9/11 (remember 1993? The whole Muslim world had lined up alongside America against Saddam just after it had cooperated with America to defeat the Soviet Union in Afghanistan), all that wise? Islam is a faith; the West is geography. How much dexterity do you need to compare apples and oranges?

The Titanic and Olympic were identical sister ships, both higher than the Great Pyramid of Giza. The former began life in 1911, hit an iceberg and became immortal. The Olympic went to sea a year earlier, in 1910, and sailed peacefully till 1937. No one remembers a suc-

cess story.

King George, I am reliably informed by AN Wilson, in After the Victorians, did not bring his real crown when he came to India for the durbar of 1911. He wore a lighter version in Delhi, made by Garrard's of London at a cost of 60,000 pounds. Guess who picked up the bill. Right. The Indian taxpayer.

Patrick French has an illustrative story about Colonel Francis Younghusband's Tibetan expedition of 1904 in his latest book. "When the British officers marched to the Tsuglakhang and other places, the inhabitants of Lhasa were displeased. They shouted and chanted to bring down rain, and made clapping noises to repulse them. In the foreigners' custom these were seen as signs of welcome, so they took off their hats and said thank you."

The World Health Organisation announced an important discovery, after years of research, in December. Circumcision can reduce the risk of HIV infection by half, so the Prophet Abraham, who started it all, was right. What was the name of the Belgian doctor who gave the world such good news? Dr Kevin De Cock.

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