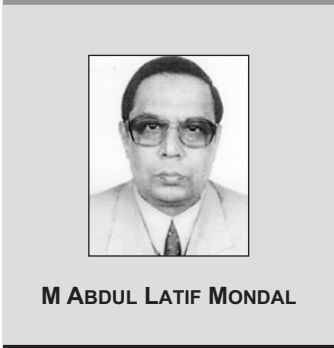


# Why Iajuddin should go



FROM day one of the present caretaker government (CTG), all the political parties and political alliances -- except BNP and its allies -- have been demanding resignation of President Iajuddin Ahmed, a BNP nominee to the office of the president, from the office of the chief adviser, to pave the way for creating a congenial atmosphere for holding a credible, acceptable, and fully participatory general election.

They demand that the president relinquishes his additional charge of the office of the chief adviser in favour of the person who, following the refusal of Justice KM Hasan to assume the office of the chief adviser, is constitutionally eligible in order of priority to head the CTG.

The AL-led grand electoral alliance has announced back-to-

**BARE FACTS**

Last but not the least, the field-level administration (which is mainly responsible for conducting the elections) designed by the immediate past regime has been kept largely intact, as the deputy commissioners (DCs), superintendents of police (SPs), upazila nirbahi officers (UNOs), and officers-in-charge (OCs) of police stations have been transferred from one district to another while holding the same positions. Mentionable that DCs and UNOs normally act returning officers and assistant returning officers. The transfers have thus not been meaningful for election.

back country-wide blockades on January 7 and 8 demanding, among other things, relinquishment of the chief adviser's office by the president, who, according to the AL president Sheikh Hasina, is "not interested in creating a congenial atmosphere for a free and fair election." The civil society members have also been making similar requests to the president.

Now the question arises as to why there is apprehension that the election held under the president-cum-chief adviser Iajuddin Ahmed may not be credible, acceptable, and fully participatory.

First, the thirteenth amendment which formally introduced the CTG system in the Constitution in 1996 has prioritized the heading of the

CTG by a retired chief justice, and in case of non-availability of any retired CJ, by a retired judge of the Appellate Division who, inter alia, has not been a member of any political party or of any association associated with or affiliated to any political party.

The assumption of the office of the chief adviser by the president in addition to his own functions is the sixth and the last option in the Constitution. The incumbent president's assumption of the office of the chief adviser in addition to his own functions without exhausting all the preceding options has contradicted the provision(s) of the Constitution on the appointment of the chief adviser. Many political observers suspect a motive behind

it.

Second, the thirteenth amendment to the Constitution has provided that CTG shall be collectively responsible to the president. The executive power of the republic shall, during the period of the CTG, be exercised by or on the authority of the chief adviser and shall be exercised by him in accordance with the advice of the CTG, consisting of chief adviser and not more than ten other advisers.

This normally means that the president and the chief adviser would be two separate persons holding two different offices. The president will constantly keep watch over the activities of the CTG and where necessary, will provide guidance to the CTG.

As a result, there will be checks and balances, and the activities of the CTG will be largely transparent. The assumption of the office of the chief adviser by the president himself has immensely harmed this spirit of the CTG system, and has even given rise to the question about the utility of the CTG system.

Third, the president's "two-in-one" position has made him almost unaccountable to anyone. Further, the chief adviser's distancing himself from his colleagues in the advisory council and adopting the policy of doing alone in violation of the constitutional dictum to exercise his executive power in accordance with the advice of the CTG [Article 58B (3)] led to the resignation on December 11 of four members of the advisory council, who are outstanding personalities in their respective fields. Appointment of four new advisers was not welcomed by the AL and its allies alleging their leaning towards the BNP-led alliance. Thus, the results have so far been poor success of the CTG in overcoming the political impasse.

Fourth, it needs no repetition that the chief adviser's neutrality has been questioned by the AL-led alliance and civil society members. But some foreign diplomats here, including the US ambassador to

Bangladesh, have also spoken on the issue. While delivering a keynote speech at a seminar titled "Democracy and Bangladesh" organized by Bangladesh Association for American Studies in Dhaka on December 17, US Ambassador Butenis said that the CTG of President Iajuddin Ahmed had not always worked neutrally.

Fifth, people's perception is that cancellation of nomination papers of HM Ershad is politically motivated, and many suspect the chief adviser's hand behind it. Some newspapers have reported that prior to the Election Commission's (EC) start of hearing of appeals filed by aspirants challenging the validity of the returning officers' (ROs) decision rejecting their nomination papers, advisors to the CTG sent a message to the EC saying that they wanted an amicable solution of Ershad's case as the Jatiya Party has already announced that it would boycott the polls if Ershad could not contest it."

But the chief adviser's summoning the EC secretary to Bangabhaban on December 30, reportedly to discuss the law and order situation in view of the AL-led alliance's announced blockade program on January 7 and 8 has given rise to certain questions. The maintenance of the law and order at

this point of time is the responsibility of the home affairs ministry headed by the chief adviser himself. Many political advisers and insiders feel that through the EC secretary, the chief adviser passed on message to the EC not to favourably consider the appeals of Ershad.

Last but not the least, the field-level administration (which is mainly responsible for conducting the elections) designed by the immediate past regime has been kept largely intact, as the deputy commissioners (DCs), superintendents of police (SPs), upazila nirbahi officers (UNOs), and officers-in-charge (OCs) of police stations have been transferred from one district to another while holding the same positions. Mentionable that DCs and UNOs normally act returning officers and assistant returning officers. The transfers have thus not been meaningful for election.

A Dhaka weekly thus writes that the fourth election was to be held under the immediate past CJ, but since the party in power manipulated the due process to facilitate Justice KM Hasan becoming the chief advise, the AL justifiably raised hell.

BNP, being a fast learner, realized that neither the chief adviser nor the civil administration, without the

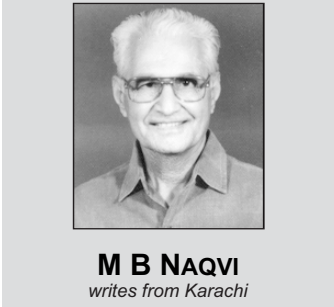
help of each other, could influence the election results. They therefore ensured that if they failed to install Justice Hasan as the chief adviser, the president, who is officially a BNP nominee, assumed that office. And to help the president to accomplish his mission, the immediate past BNP government neutralized all non-BNP bureaucrats so that all possible replacements had to be BNP sympathizers.

In view of the above discussion, President Iajuddin Ahmed's relinquishment of the additional charge of the chief adviser, appointment of a person who, following the refusal of Justice KM Hasan, is constitutionally eligible in order of priority to head the CTG, and making a last minute replacement of the field-level officials responsible for conducting the election with officials known for their non-partisan behaviour in consultation with the EC, may create an atmosphere for holding an election that would be credible, acceptable and fully participatory.

By relinquishing the office of the chief adviser, President Iajuddin Ahmed may be a part of history for holding an election which will receive national and global credibility and acclamation.

M Abdul Latif Mondal is a former Secretary to the Government.

# America's choice?



THE US has finally got what it wanted, even if it is somewhat diluted. The UN Security Council has passed a resolution mandating sanctions against Iran. Iran has replied with a law obliging its government to review ties with IAEA, hinting at a refusal to submit to its inspections of Iranian nuclear installations. How things will develop will depend on whether the bloody mess that is Iraq and Afghanistan is cleaned up in an orderly manner, or left to go on becoming worse.

President George Bush apparently does not think he is a lame-duck president. He is, in fact, staying the course. There is no likelihood of early troops withdrawals from Iraq, while withdrawal from Afghanistan has not even been mooted. It means that Bush is still following the geopolitical goals attributed to Neo-cons by somewhat modified means.

Indeed, more troops are being sent to the region, with an eye on Iran, while the Fifth Fleet is being reinforced with another aircraft-carrier group. All talk of withdrawal actually means the dispersal of troops rather than their going home. That may be the net outcome of the

**PLAIN WORDS**

The major difficulty for America is that Iran is not a pushover. It can hurt America's own military power. If a direct war takes place some of Iran's smart new weapons can inflict spectacular losses. Secondly, the US is likely to be forced to invade the vast Iranian territories, including deserts. If the Americans could not conquer Iraq without inciting a tough resistance, Iran would be twenty times more difficult to conquer.

ISG report by Mr James Baker.

The Khomeini revolution destroyed American domination of Iran. The revolutionaries were led by the clergy who naturally incline toward right-wing and religious ideas. It did not take the country leftward. The internal differences over economic policies could never be overcome; the revolution was, and still is, undecided about either socialism or capitalism. There is still a whiff of revolutionary élan. Tehran has followed a non-aligned policy with efforts to build Iran's own power. While its military power does not compare even with Israel, let alone the US, its military has the advantage of organization, discipline and motivation. The regime is still capable of much mass mobilization. It has considerable oil that will bring in plenty of Euros in the coming days.

Iran's strength includes a modicum of genuine democracy through free elections, though circumscribed by the constitutional clout of the senior clergy. The clerical regime's realpolitik wants to bridge the gap between Shias and Sunnis in the region so as to be able to win the support of the Arab masses in its struggle against the region's own feudal Amirs and kings or dictators.

Tehran feels mandated to counter Israel's power and influence. And Iranian clerics are as good players of geopolitics as was the Shah, if not better. Tehran needs to be taken more seriously than has been the case so far.

Here the American fears intrude. The chief American purpose in the ME is securing Israel's role and power. All American objectives hinge on the Israelis' ability to reshape the region. Iran being able to counter Israel's power will be a threat that the Americans will feel compelled to meet. That is the difference between North Korea and Iran. While North Korea is now off the hook, Iran is not. What Iran admits to be doing is within its rights: it wants to enrich uranium so as to have locally processed fuel for the nuclear reactor that is coming up. The Americans suspect that Iranians would go beyond enriching the uranium for a civilian reactor; and may enrich it to the level required for a nuclear weapon.

American suspicions of Iran are so strong that they are assuming that Iran is actually engaged in bomb-making, despite its denials. Objectively, American suspicions are understandable. Look at the

Middle East map and see how Israelis have behaved vis-à-vis the Arabs, because they have the bomb and, additionally, have America supporting them. Shouldn't the Iranians think of finding an antidote for both powers? Indeed a case of sorts exists for the Iranian bomb, the way Pakistanis thought they needed the bomb to offset India's.

Strong winds of change are, anyhow, sweeping the Middle East. The Arabs have heard the Iranian propaganda for over 25 years; they could not but have been affected by this effective propaganda. They have seen the way the Israelis humiliate the Palestinians, and the way they treat other Arabs has stirred their souls. To be sure, most Arabs remain underdeveloped and mostly apathetic.

But a change of sorts is taking shape, and some credit may also be given to the often cynical American verbiage regarding democracy and human rights. Although American words are not very credible, the continued utterances, ad nauseum, cannot leave a residue of desire for it. The American practice, of course, remains wedded to supporting tyrants against the latter's own people for preserving the status quo

that benefits the US.

Thus, there is a tumult in the Arab mind. The rise of Hamas, Hizbollah and Amal underlines a general restiveness. It is due also to the logical perception of what Israel and America are doing in the region. They concentrate on American actions -- whatever the motives, though these also need to be examined -- and disregard rhetoric. They see that the US has effectively put Iraq on the road to destruction as a nation state. What may emerge is three states which would probably be embroiled in internal struggles or wars, while all the oil in the north and south will remain with US companies. Maybe many other states will be engulfed by civil wars as a consequence of the rise of Shia consciousness in the rest of the region, especially the Gulf Sheikhdoms.

The long-running and low-intensity cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia has had evil consequences, particularly in Iraq and also in other countries, not excluding Pakistan. The Saudis have, without taking any official responsibility, let the world know that they will not tolerate the rise of a Shia axis in the Middle East that will come into being as a result of a potentially powerful Shia state in southern Iraq -- allied with Iran and maybe others like Lebanon. Other Shia minorities in the region are now beginning to demand their share in representation and power. There is a threat of a large-scale Shia-Sunni conflict throughout the Middle East.

The stakes are high. America has to rethink about what it wanted to achieve in Iraq and Afghanistan. Can those purposes be achieved? Perhaps the Afghan imbroglio may

be even worse than Iraq's in terms of the longer-term aims of acquiring a dominant voice in Central Asia. The fates of Afghanistan and Pakistan are linked. If the present war's ethnic underpinning come to the fore Pakistan's integrity can also be at risk, while Afghanistan may meet a fate similar in effect to Iraq's.

The major difficulty for America is that Iran is not a pushover. It can hurt America's own military power. If a direct war takes place some of Iran's smart new weapons can inflict spectacular losses. Secondly, the US is likely to be forced to invade the vast Iranian territories, including deserts. If the Americans could not conquer Iraq without inciting a tough resistance, Iran would be twenty times more difficult to conquer. The Americans will be hopelessly bogged down, and will have to accept defeat in view of their inability to accept too many body-bags.

Iran can also punish the whole lot of developed countries by stopping its own oil exports, and also possibly disrupting all exports through the Straits of Hormuz altogether for sometime. It can also spin into a Third World War -- as a long shot. The possibilities are mind-boggling.

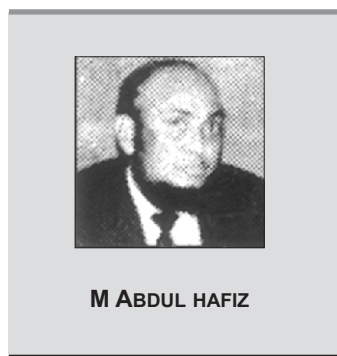
Therefore, the Americans have to re-think their role and aims. They will have to adjust to a new emerging world that was not there in 1945. The 21st century does not look like becoming an American Century, though America will probably remain the sole superpower for a couple of decades more.

MB Naqvi is a leading Pakistani columnist.

# Stay the course?

**PERSPECTIVES**

A rattled Bush hoped against hope that Uncle Jim -- who served his father as secretary of state and is considered a close family friend -- would once again ride to his rescue.



IN 2000, James Baker came to the rescue when it appeared that George Bush, the Republican presidential candidate might sink in Florida. The lawyer in him instinctively persuaded the parties concerned that the electoral dispute must be referred to the Supreme Court where, he was convinced, the conservative majority would deliver a positive result. And he was right.

Years later, George Bush, now the US president, is irrevocably stuck in Iraq, where he has made a mess of his policy, resulting in the possible break-up of the country amidst mounting sectarian strife. In recognition of the unfolding disaster, a congressional initiative earlier this month led to the establishment of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group (ISG). Baker was back to the scene as its co-chairman. The group did not, however, receive publicity until the Republicans faced monumental popular backlash in recently-held mid-term election. It was only then that the ISG was transformed into a panacea.

A rattled Bush hoped against hope that Uncle Jim -- who served his father as secretary of state and is considered a close family friend -- would once again ride to his rescue. In the given circumstances Baker did his best, but was unable to prevent the ISG report from being viewed as the Bush administration's second serious blow within a month following the election verdict of November that delivered both the houses of Congress to the Democrats. Bush could hardly draw any comfort from the report.

The ideologues of the far-right involved in pushing Bush for Iraq misadventure are up in arms against the ISG report, although its 79 proposals do not contain anything that can even vaguely be construed as radical. On the military front its advice barely differs from the strategy that the administration has already evolved -- with greater emphasis than before on the training of the locally recruited troops and getting them to do the dirty work with the US forces only in supportive role. However, the problem is that the strategy isn't working.

The ISG calls for the gradual withdrawal of US combat units from early 2008 contingent upon the ability of the proxy forces to sustain in power a US-friendly regime with reduced American assistance. It also implicitly accepted the imperative for an indefinite US military presence in the region.

The ideologues are even less thrilled by the Baker commission's emphasis on a new diplomatic offensive that involves an international support group consisting of Iraq's neighbours, other regional powers, the US, the EU, and other interested countries.

Perhaps the neo-con cabal is irked in part at the brutal and frank assessment of the existing situation. It is also particularly averse to the idea of a place at the table for Syria and Iran and the suggestion that the US should unconditionally engage in dialogue with these two nations, leaving the dilemma of Iran's nuclear ambition to UN security council.

But it was apparently in response to developments last month, when according to the US press, the Saudi regime effectively summoned Dick Cheney to Riyadh and issued a stark warning: if the US pulls out of Iraq, the Saudis will be obliged to step into the breach in order to protect minority Arab Sunni community, even if it entails war with Iran.

The ISG's proposal appears to be motivated in part by the presumption that a platform for negotiation would reduce the likelihood of such hostilities breaking out. Washington's far-right cheer crowd, however, look upon the contemplated regional conference as a cover for the occupying forces "cutting and running," although this suspicion is not substantiated.

A precipitate withdrawal may be the least damaging option available to the US. The fear that it would lead to an upsurge in violence may well be exaggerated. There is at least a chance that once the indignity of brutal occupation is removed from the occupation a sobriety will prevail and Iraqis will be increasingly inclined to work out modus vivendi as an alternative to open-ended sectarian violence.

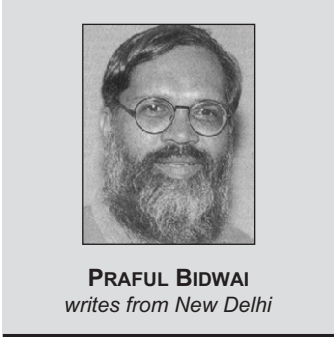
This may be to be an over-optimistic conjecture. But had the ISG called for an immediate withdrawal, that would have been out there in public in spite of Bush's rejection. As things stand now, President Bush has virtually rejected the bipartisan ISG recommendation for a withdrawal of American troops even by the first quarter of 2008.

Unfortunately neither the ISG, composed of luminaries with impeccable conservative credentials, could come out of its warped mindset, nor the president himself was in a mood to avail the opportunity for changing course Iraq.

Under the circumstances, President Bush seems happy to "stay the course" which will mean the continuation of the slaughter already underway. So far, by estimates worked out by an American think-tank, the civilian casualties have reached the unbelievable figure of 600,000 dead, with the American death toll has crossed 3,000. But George Bush refuses to be rescued this time, even by Uncle Jim.

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

# Back to Hindutva and hatred



IF there's one organisation in India, which can pretend that it always lays down the agenda, it's the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). At its national council meeting in Lucknow, Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee exhorted it to win the coming Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections as a prelude to returning to power nationally.

BJP leaders themselves manufactured this pretence and highlighted the issue of who would lead the party in the next general election.

Mr LK Advani set the ball rolling when he told a TV interviewer that he should be the BJP's next prime minister; yet he doesn't expect Mr Vajpayee to nominate him. Soon, Messrs MM Joshi and Rajnath Singh, anointed BJP president for three years, also threw their hats into the ring.

Mr Singh used colorful, semi-rustic imagery, of baratis (the bridegroom's party) only waiting to carry

**The BJP is disoriented by all this. Until recently, it was in outright denial of its 2004 defeat. It still lacks a political strategy -- and leadership. Its president is a narrow-minded provincial politician, who isn't even remotely acquainted with the India that's outside the Hindi belt. Lurking behind him is Mr Narendra Milosevic Modi, who, sadly, enjoys a high level of acceptance within the BJP as its de facto number two leader.**

the bride, satta ki sundari (deity of power) to Delhi.

Meanwhile, Mr Narendra Modi strutted around as if he were Mr Vajpayee's successor, being the only senior second-generation leader to wield state power.

However, it's preposterous to regard the issue of BJP leadership in 2009 as relevant. One must be irrationally exuberant to be convinced that the BJP will probably come to power in the next election.

At Lucknow, the BJP returned to hard-line Hindutva, focusing on "Muslim appeasement" via the Sachar Committee report.

There were raucous warnings about India's "second partition," appeals for a Ram temple at Ayodhya, and a berating reference to India's Hindus as "second-class citizens." Leaders spewed venom on Muslims and hysterically opposed a Kashmir "sell-out."

The BJP is desperate for an electoral "magic wand." It has been in steep decline since its 2004 defeat. Its performance in several by-elections, loss of power in Jharkhand, and demoralization of state units all point to this -- not to

speak of Pramod Mahajan's fratricide, and backward-caste (OBC) leader Uma Bharati's defection.

It is only in urban Uttar Pradesh that the BJP has registered (modest) gains. During the recent municipal elections, it won eight of 12 mayoral positions. (It had won six in 2001.) In smaller towns it was defeated by the Samajwadi Party.

This was no triumph. The elections weren't representative because the Bahujan Samaj Party, UP's number two, didn't contest them. It backed select candidates, including many from the BJP, to defeat the SP.

The BJP benefited both from the anti-incumbency against Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav, and the communal polarization triggered by recent events. (For instance, Minister Haji Yakub offered Rs 50 crores to kill the Danish cartoonist who ridiculed Prophet Mohammed).

There's a strange confluence of interests between the BJP and SP. The harder Mr Yadav tries to woo Muslims (who are suspicious of him), the more the upper-caste Hindu shifts towards the BJP. Mr Yadav offered 5-star hospitality in

Lucknow to the BJP brass; they accepted it.

Yet, the BJP's moderate gains can, at best, only partially offset its long downside. Its assembly strength has plummeted from the 1991 peak of 221 (of 419 seats) to just 88 (of 403).

The BJP should know that Sachar isn't Shah Bano (a 1984 Congress attempt to please Muslim religious hardliners.) The Sachar Report is a serious, solidly documented analysis of anti-Muslim discrimination. It pleads for pluralism -- not sectarianism.

It's unlikely that the "appeasement" card will work given the present national mood, which favors integration, inclusion and equity. There's widespread support for peace with Pakistan and a border settlement and cooperation with China.

The Ayodhya plank won't sell. As the Sangh Parivar's own countless futile attempts to organize yatras on the issue show, the public isn't interested in it.

The BJP's return to hard-line Hindutva represents a terrible retrogression. It's not in the interest

of democracy and pluralism that India's largest opposition party should embrace such a narrow, divisive, communal agenda.

In line with this ideological-political shift, the BJP has also executed an organisational shift. It has amended its constitution so all its secretaries at the national and state levels are pracharaks (full-time RSS propagandists).

Mr Rajnath Singh has further strengthened RSS influence -- not least because he lacks a strong independent base. The RSS, in turn, is only too happy that it can revive the three contentious issues - Ram Temple, Uniform Civil Code, and Article 370 -- which were put on hold for dishonourable reasons of "expediency."

The Lucknow conclave leaves the BJP's structural crisis unresolved. Ideologically, the party is trapped between orthodox, Islamophobic, Hindutva typical of small-town traders on the one hand, and pro-globalisation Big Business on the other.

Politically, it's divided between Hindutva, and opportunistic electoral alliances. Organisationally, it remains completely dependent on the parivar.

As this column has argued, the BJP's ascendancy from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s was founded on three mutually reinforcing factors. First, the Congress's long-term decline owing to its compromises with communalism and

market fundamentalism. This, coupled with the Left's stagnation after the Soviet Union's collapse, shifted India's political spectrum Rightwards.

Second, the Ayodhya mobilisation in the late 1980s allowed Hindutva to percolate, and the BJP to break out of its narrow upper-caste Hindu-Hindi belt confines. And third, the party's "social engineering," of combining "Mandal" with "Kamandal" (Hindutva), won it OBC support.

None of these factors operates today. The Congress has revived itself. The Left has expanded. Regional parties with subaltern agendas have grown. And the centre of gravity of Indian politics has shifted leftwards. Social justice has displaced Ayodhya.

The BJP is disoriented by all this. Until recently, it was in outright denial of its 2004 defeat. It still lacks a political strategy -- and leadership.

Its president is a narrow-minded provincial politician, who isn't even remotely acquainted with the India that's outside the Hindi belt.

Lurking behind him is Mr Narendra Milosevic Modi, who, sadly, enjoys a high level of acceptance within the BJP as its de facto number two leader.

The BJP is caught between such appalling aspiring leaders, and geriatrics out-of-sync with reality. This is an unenviable state.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.