

Siege programme again

Whither the role of caretaker government?

IT is with a great degree of despondency we notice that instead of witnessing the proverbial 'light at the end of the tunnel' the nation is destined to withstand yet another round of oborodh (siege) programme this week (7 and 8 January). The announcement of the programme from the grand alliance leaders came following their boycotting of the election on the ground that most of the contentious political and electoral reform issues still remain unresolved and that the caretaker government (CG) has failed to create the environment for holding the election in a free and fair manner. The grand alliance also demands resignation of the chief adviser of the CG on the ground of incompetence.

Despite the political impasse worsening every day, and the demand for correcting the voter list resounding ever louder in every corner of the country, the Election Commission is bent on holding the election within the stipulated time on the plea of upholding the constitutional requirements. Surprisingly, the EC bigwigs never clarified whether the constitution permits holding an election even if the fundamental instrument, the voter list, remains outrageously flawed and unacceptable to a vast majority of voters. We believe an authentic interpretation of the constitution is very much required at this critical juncture of the nation.

The pervasive wisdom in society is that the apparent ineptness of the caretaker government under the stewardship of president-cum-chief adviser Professor Iajuddin Ahmed in creating a level playing field for all the major political parties has resulted in the obvious -- compounding the political entanglement in the country -- which he and his team were rather supposed to circumvent. Regrettably, the manner in which Iajuddin and his team performed to stem the rot can only be termed as quackery of the worst kind.

Notwithstanding the rationale behind the call for oborodh, the fact remains that the extended Eid holidays are yet to be over therefore the two-day oborodh would virtually keep the wheels of economy shut down till the middle of the month. We therefore would earnestly request the grand alliance leaders to opt for other programmes that would help attain the same objectives but with less suffering to the people.

The cold wave casualties

Could we not save the victims?

THE news of at least 40 people already dying in cold is poignantly tragic because such fatalities could have been avoided with precautions. Hundreds continue to suffer, mostly belonging to the poorer section of the populace. People continue to be hospitalised with cold related diseases, where often treatment is not being possible due to non-availability of such life saving equipment like the Nebulizers.

Reportedly the DC of Nilphamari in a desperate bid has already sent a fax to authorities at the capital requesting urgent supply of 10 thousand blankets since the District Relief Officer did not have adequate stock of warm clothes. We find it rather strange that there was no preparedness to meet the predictable exigency. It is particularly inexplicable when deaths and hardship of people in certain regions of the country have become a yearly phenomenon.

If we are able to bring about self sufficiency in food, a task of far greater complexity and dimension, it should be quite possible for us to deal with this humanitarian problem of lesser magnitude, more so, since there is a pattern in the advent of such cold waves every year. The pattern makes it possible for weather experts not only to predict the onset but also the locations it might strike. This in turn should make the job of the administration easier to deal with. Besides the preparedness strategy to tackle the emerging situation is quite simple and workable.

Let the administration, the NGOs and the community together rise to the occasion and come forward to mitigate the sufferings of the people due to cold, now and in the future. However, needless to say, that the administration has to take the lead in this regard. Let no one die or suffer due to our negligence, apathy and carelessness from here onwards at the time of the greatest need.

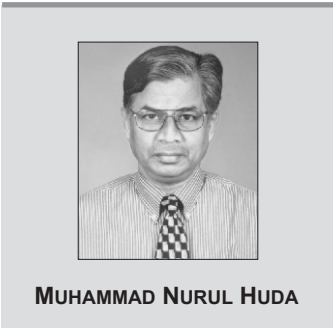
KAZI ALAUDDIN AHMED

IT seems the penultimate Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh and now Ambassador in Washington has done a good job at least for his country's head of the caretaker government. As a diplomat it is of course an unwritten part of his duty to ensure that the image of the government which he represents is not tainted abroad. This demands of the incumbent ambassador or his mission doing some sort of subtle lobbying with the State Department. Ambassador Shamsheer Mobin Chowdhury was the Foreign Secretary during the 4-party alliance government and was very much in its good book. It has been a practice for long that the outgoing Foreign Secretary enjoys his last posting in our mission in Washington, USA before retirement. On Dec. 15 evening by the courtesy of a television channel it was learnt that the US Assistant

Foreign Secretary Richard Boucher was telling his listeners in a meeting in Washington, inter alia, that the President and head of the caretaker government has been doing his best to ensure a free and fair election in Bangladesh.

It may be recalled that Boucher visited Dhaka a couple of times in the past few months. A number of other US government representatives and a delegation of NDI had also been here. In their agenda a free, fair and transparent election in Bangladesh was very much there. Besides, in their press briefings re-constitution and reform of the Election Commission had been a priority. The US Ambassador in Dhaka has been moving back and forth in a desperate bid to get clear and unambiguous word from the President-cum-CA of the caretaker government and the Election Commission chief that they would arrange a fair and credible election in the country. With a view to resolving the conflict between the two big

Degeneration of the caretaker concept



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THERE is no denying that few Bangladeshis could be credited with positive innovative ideas that have beneficially determining economic impact on the society. It was, therefore, not unnatural to see many Bangladeshis experiencing a euphoric feeling in the not-too-distant past in the wake of the awarding of Nobel prize to Professor Yunus and the Grameen Bank. A thinking Bangladeshi and scores of diligent and ethical Bangladeshi women demonstrated with resounding confidence that the poorest of the poor could be creditworthy without the constraint of collateral. Non-descript folks proved that trust begets trust and that this trait coupled with sense of responsibility was not conditional upon heredity or wealth.

In the bigger canvass of our body-politic, however, the uniquely Bangladeshi dispensation of non-partisan Caretaker Government to oversee a national election thereby ensuring the passage of a peaceful and orderly transfer of political power, has undergone a rude jolt. This novel constitutional arrangement that could also be described as scathing indictment on the

unreliability of our political classes was still a welcome device in our volatile political transaction. A reactive polity while paying glowing tributes to the virtues of the Caretaker system was perhaps unaware that our patriotic politicians were slowly but surely undoing the very arrangement. Little did we realise that the success of any election related constitutional arrangement depends very largely on the cooperation of the regulatory

of no party. The President's apparatus separation from business is meant to remove it both from enmities and from desecration thereby enabling it to combine the affection of conflicting parties to be able to retain the visible symbol of unity. The role of the President is largely formal and ceremonial.

If the role of the President is to remain respected by parties of differing political persuasions and the nation, it is only axiomatic that

when ground reality is that the immediate past top civil servant joins the party that ran the immediate past political government and is found active in the corridors of power. Such association and affinity cannot be a sudden and instant affair howsoever one may try to justify the propriety of the process.

The golden rule is that since the civil service has to serve governments of all political persuasions, it

civil servants who would perform the very important job of 'Returning Officers' in the national election remain suspect. This definitely does not augur well for the nation because very clearly doubts are expressed in the integrity of the District Magistrate.

A Returning Officer performs functions which are judicial or at least quasi-judicial in character. He is expected to apply his mind to the problems judicially with the sense

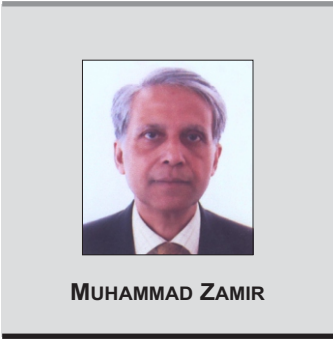
from previously known pliant officials at election time when such officials would act as 'Returning Officers'. A senior judicial official acting as District Judge was actively involved in party politics and his resignation came only after there was uproar in the concerned quarters including the apex court. Confidence and trust in the guardians are on the decrease.

We need the benefit of proper and lawful caretaker government for a good length of time to nurture and sustain democracy in our reactive environment. However, the greater need is the resilience and responsibility of the institutions that ensure the upright functioning of the caretaker government. Our socio-political polarisation has been greatly responsible for the unsatisfactory performance of the vital State institutions. The degeneration of conscience of the political classes has brought us to the present mess which if not appreciated for corrective action carries the risk of throwing us in a stateless society.

The narrowing and stifling purposes of politics cannot be allowed to decapitate us and arbitrary exercise of power should not be permitted to use the garb of constitutionalism. Our democracy needs the aristocracy of talent, of knowledge and character and this aristocracy has to take to public life, however distasteful it may be. The constitution has not failed the people while the chosen leaders appear to have failed. Concerned Bangladeshis should be willing to take a continuous and considered part in public life.

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A dictator's last defiance



LAST Saturday, as Iraq and most of the Muslim world celebrated Eid-ul-Azha, the festival of sacrifice, Saddam Hussein, former strongman of Iraq met his destiny at the gallows. The indecent hasty execution of the fallen leader during the time of Hajj opened more windows of debate rather than the required closure.

Saddam's surrender to coalition forces on December 13, 2003, his arrest and his subsequent trial became the source of contention among international jurists. Matters were also not helped with the manner in which the charges were framed, evidence gathered and the court composed. Many pointed out that the trial appeared to be directed towards the achieving of revenge rather than justice and reconciliation. Latest developments tend to uphold such an opinion.

The first judge, an ethnic Kurd, resigned because of government interference in the trial. His successor, also Kurdish, turned out to be less than partial with open personal grievances against the fallen dictator. The judicial process was also affected by three of Saddam's defence lawyers being shot down in cold blood. Some of the others in the defence team went on strike to protest the lack of protection afforded to them. The court then appointed new lawyers who had no past experience in the ramifications of international criminal law. The evolving situation led Ramsay Clark, former US Attorney General and member of Saddam's defence team, to express his unhappiness

in the manner in which the trial was being carried out.

Saddam must have realised what fate had in store for him. This affected his response and action in the court. Contrary to his meek submission to the coalition forces at the time of his capture, Saddam gradually, started exhibiting signs of defiance. His old personality resurfaced in his response to the judicial process. This continued even on the day of execution. He

sect of people living in Iraq. While doing so, he liked to compare himself with the former Yugoslav leader Marshal B. Tito who had brought unity to another 'fragmented country'. He also took pride in the empowerment of women in Iraq compared to the neighbouring 'feudal' Arab countries. It was also very clear from his comments that he believed that he was a man of destiny, for whom, the use of chemical weapons or use of mustard gas

as 100 violent deaths per day. The US death toll, meanwhile, has also, climbed to at least 3,002 by the final day of 2006. Apparently, 113 US servicemen died in December, which made it the bloodiest of 2006. This cumulative figure is incidentally higher than the number of people killed in the USA due to the terrorist acts of 11 September 2001. News agencies have also reported the gory statistics that more than 25,000 persons of US

Saddam's hurried execution, just four days after an appeals court upheld his conviction and sentence, but also incensed by the unruly scene in the execution chamber, captured on video, in which Saddam was openly taunted even as the trap door was opening.

It would also be interesting to note here that the judge who first presided over the case that resulted in Saddam's death sentence has commented that the

shift his rhetoric about the reality of the situation in Iraq. It is no longer -- "absolutely, we are winning." Now he is saying, "we are not winning, but we are not losing." It is also very clear that US voters and public opinion want an orderly exit and that the Democrats, currently holding the upper hand in the Congress, are not 'buying Bush's big lie'.

US President Bush and his advisers now have to consider a surge of new options and a fresh strategy on how to deal with the expanding insurgency in Iraq. From that point of view Saddam's execution will have to be treated as a 'milestone'. In this context it will also have to be understood that just sending more troops to support Malki will not resolve the crisis. More troops might mean more casualties in the ever-growing sectarian crisis. What is needed is a coalition of moderates where the Shia and Kurdish communities should be persuaded to cede more powers of governance to the Sunni minority. Otherwise, the sense of growing insecurity among the Sunnis will raise tension, deepen mistrust and fuel violence. What is required is a constructive engagement without partisanship. This course of action, along with a clear prospective timetable for eventual repatriation of Coalition troops from Iraq, will help to create an ambience of stability so desperately needed within the federation. Gloating over Saddam's execution will not help.

President Bush and his allies in Iraq have to be more mature and less vindictive. This must also be seen to be so. Otherwise there will be greater intensification of the sectarian conflict and the nascent civil war. This eventually will lead to Balkanisation of Iraq and the fragmentation of the country. The USA has to decide what it wants.

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refused to have his head covered and prepared to meet the gallows without any struggle. His last letter and the manner in which he met his death, has now transformed the despot in the Arab streets into a sacrificial victim.

I met Saddam for the first time in 1981 during the Iraq-Iran war. I acted as an interpreter between him and the late President Ziaur Rahman during the latter's efforts to bring about a cease-fire between the two warring countries. I met him several times after that in the course of my diplomatic assignments. He struck me as not only being a xenophobic extreme nationalist but also an ambitious, arrogant leader who did not care too much about world opinion or international legal principles. He also appeared to be relatively confident about his relations with the USA and Europe underlining more than once the importance of oil in international politics. He was also proud about the manner in which he had managed to create 'a sense of unity' among the different

or the killing of thousands of civilians meant nothing as long as his objectives could be realised.

This last trait did not endear him to me. His subsequent actions against his own unarmed civilian population, the invasion of Kuwait and his fondness for using the country's wealth to meet the needs of himself and his family members were examples of poor judgment.

All of this is however in the past.

The question that needs to be answered now is whether the execution of Saddam needed to be carried out with such haste and whether such a course of action will ensure stability in sectarian strife-torn Iraq.

Latest reports coming out of Iraq suggest that the internal situation within Iraq is far from stable. The latest tabulation by the Iraqi ministries of Health, Defence and Interior has shown that 14,298 civilians, 1,348 police and 627 soldiers have been killed in the violence that has raged in that country last year. The United Nations has however reported a higher figure of as many

origin have been wounded in Iraq over the past three years.

The latest incidents also indicate that the sectarian divide is hardening. Demonstrations carried out in the Golden Dome area of Shiite Samarra after the execution reflected that many Sunni Arabs might now be more actively supporting the small number of Sunni militants fighting the country's Shiite-dominated government. One may recall in this context that bombing of the Golden Dome shrine, by Sunni extremists 10 months ago, triggered the current cycle of retaliatory attacks between Sunnis and Shia, in the form of daily bombings, kidnappings and murders.

US strategists need to understand that until Saddam's execution, most Sunnis sympathised with militants but avoided taking a direct role in the sectarian conflict. The current Sunni protests, however appear to be signalling a spreading militancy. Arab analysts have pointed out that Sunnis all over the world were not only outraged by

former dictator's execution at the start of Eid was illegal according to Iraqi law, and contradicted Islamic custom. Judge Rizgar M Amin, a Kurd, has clarified that the law states, "No verdict should be implemented during the official holidays or religious festivals."

To this was added the views expressed by Finnish Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja (holding the EU Presidency on that date) wherein he not only reiterated the EU's opposition to capital punishment but also pointed out that the court case against Saddam 'gave cause for some serious objections'. The Afghan President, a creation of the US, also appeared to criticise the timing of the execution.

Such opinions, for obvious reasons, have not helped the Coalition objectives and the Iraqi government's cause. It has helped to transform the defiant Saddam into a nationalist martyr who was executed not in the interest of justice.

The prevailing circumstances have also forced President Bush to

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POST BREAKFAST

OPINION

Unending predicament

wanted to be clever and firm but in the end could not hold on to his own citadel. Eventually he stands there trapped in the snare spread over by his formidable benefactors. Things are now terribly muddled. A successful retreat from the tangle is far more difficult and uncertain.

Holding of a free and fair election in the country has been a deep concern not only for the people at home but also among the international community. There has been a common feeling that a really congenial atmosphere is yet to be there as would enable all the political parties to effectively participate in the election. The NDI representatives from the United States, the European Commission delegation, the UN body, Ambassadors and High Commissioners of a number of Western countries in Dhaka have expressed their scepticism about the ultimate holding of the election as would be credible to the national and the international community. The outgoing secretary

general of the United Nations, for one, had been highly concerned and was insisting that ground should be prepared for all to participate in the election freely. In his statement on December 15 he reiterated his conviction that the caretaker government would play an absolutely neutral role to restore confidence of every one in the Election Commission towards holding a fair election reflecting the genuine verdict of the people.

The whole situation around the prospect of holding a fair election on one hand and on the other of holding it at all continues to be very uncertain. More so after the announcement that the grand alliance is not participating until the demands are met. Rather a confrontation is more apprehended as the 4-party alliance has stressed for holding it as announced without caring for participation by 'others'.

Earlier US Ambassador Patricia Butenis told her listeners in a seminar on Dec. 17 that the President

and Chief Adviser of the caretaker government would have to prove his neutrality and ensure a free and fair election which would have to be acceptable to all. She also insisted that there should be fresher dialogue between the contesting political parties in order to arrive at a consensus. She regretted that the last dialogue between the two was ineffective as both were stiff-necked and unable to give in on any item on the agenda.

The 4-party alliance, as it appears, is all set for participating in the election. The 14-party alliance, on the contrary, will not take part till the package deal is realised. Besides, the former insists that the election schedule be revised at least by two months and likewise the date for submission of candidature be also shifted. The proposition sounds reasonable because much of the available time has been wasted by the people responsible for holding the election in time. The Election Commission is yet to

complete the voter list purging out the fictitious voters and entering the genuine ones who were left out mischievously. The wastage of time has been very costly and the entire responsibility, as per the logical sequence, devolves upon the man at the helm. He is yet to extricate himself out of the dubious role he has been made to play. The constitutional handicap as frequently alluded to by the leader of the 4-party alliance is a very weak argument. The constitution is for the people, it is not the holy book that cannot be changed for the present, to offset the impending deadlock. The President might seek the opinion of the Chief Justice and of the leading experts on constitution in the country. The people want peace and nothing less than peace.

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