

Osama bin Laden is dead, again

BRAD K BERNER

THIS time it's for real, almost. On December 17, 2006, officials announced that "Laden," as he was known, was killed by sharpshooters in the northeastern state of Assam, India. "Laden," a 10-foot tall killer bull elephant named after Osama bin Laden by fearful villagers was responsible for 14 deaths in the area and had evaded two previous assassination attempts.

Surprisingly, neither conspiracy theorists nor the Bush administration attempted to use the event to sell books or videos or for political gain. It would have been a hard sell: "Laden" was in India, not Afghanistan; and 10-foot tall pachyderms are not prone to suicide bombings and crashing planes into buildings.

Nevertheless, the real bin Laden has been sold before to the US public, either as the commander-in-chief of a worldwide army of terrorists or as an impotent terrorist hiding in his cave.

Over the past five years, bin Laden has been killed and resurrected on numerous occasions. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, American politicians, mistaking cowboy movies for reality, proclaimed Bin Laden wanted "dead or alive" and depicted him as the commander-in-chief of a highly lethal worldwide army of terrorists.

Subsequently, after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan succeeded in toppling the Taliban and destroying al Qaeda's infrastructure, this contradictory image -- commander-in-chief/impotent cave dwelling fugitive -- has swung back and forth, according to the release of his communiqués, al Qaeda attacks, political agendas, or media ratings.

Not only has bin Laden's image varied, but he has been reported dead, then alive, and then dead again. For those who speculated on his demise, his communiqués had obviously been faked.

For those who posited that he was still alive, he was, again, hiding out impotently in his cave, far removed from the real "War on Terror" in Iraq, or the real mastermind behind it all.

So, what is to be made of this image pendulum? Is bin Laden a harmless fugitive or the commander-in-chief? Is he a real threat or merely a political pawn used by nefarious politicians? Is he alive or dead, and does it matter?

True, bin Laden still personally participates in directing al Qaeda operations, but al Qaeda is not an army. It is a clandestine organization, now numbering around 50,000 devout adherents according to the latest US intelligence estimates, but most operations are conducted independently, without direct orders from bin Laden.

This is hardly an army that threatens to destroy Western civilization all by itself.

No matter how politically manipulated bin Laden's image is, the threat is real, but it does not center around one man. It comes from both the devout adherents and the many like-minded organizations that have developed over the years from Southeast Asia to Europe.

All of this is linked together by one thing -- ideology. While not agreeing with every point bin Laden has made in his speeches, the organizations/adherents are anti-Western, anti-Israel, and anti any Muslim who doesn't agree with their agenda.

They favour driving the Western foreign presence or influence from their regions and establishing an Islamic government.

Within this reality, bin Laden is neither commander-in-chief nor fugitive. He is a symbol -- a hero in the eyes of a growing jihadist movement.

When he dies, his followers will most assuredly announce his death, for in their eyes he will have become a martyr to their cause.

One thing is predictable in our contemporary, unpredictable world. The next bin Laden communiqué will produce another politically expedient rollercoaster ride. He will be elevated, deprecated, and relegated back to his cave.

If the communiqué coincides with a major al Qaeda attack, he will be the commander-in-chief, again. Few will bother to ask the key question, why has the ideology he espouses become popular? Here in the United States, the answers to this question do not fit the worldview of our political and media elites, so the pendulum will continue to produce a worldview that is dangerously removed from reality.

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ZAHID HOSSAIN

THE neutrality of Prof Iajuddin's caretaker government has always been a big question, and possibly that is the root cause of the present political impasse in the country. Even the US ambassador, in a recent comment, has gone to the extent of saying that the caretaker government of Prof Iajuddin had not always worked neutrally.

The practice of installing a non-party caretaker government for organizing a free, fair and credible parliamentary election was introduced in Bangladesh in 1991. Basically, the spirit behind the introduction of the system was to form a purely non-partisan government so that a really level playing field could be prepared, and a congenial and conducive atmosphere created for holding a free, fair and credible election which would be acceptable at home and abroad.

The pattern of bureaucratic and military rule that became firmly established in Pakistan influenced the trend of politics in Bangladesh, which was a part of Pakistan until the country's independence in 1971. The military leaders, after proclaiming Martial Law in the country, time and again portrayed themselves as saviours of the nation in times of "peril," and were supported in this by a section of the bureaucracy and some political leaders. The absence of frequent elections, and the recurrence of fraudulent elections, alienated the people from the democratic political process. Martial law was in force in the country for more than a decade, and authoritarian rule continued until 1990.

During the rule of military leaders from 1975 to 1990 a number of abusive and fraudulent elections were held where people did not have the right to choose their rulers/ government, and "vote

RIPAN KUMAR BISWAS

LIKE me, every Bangladeshi has a humble question to the politicians, elected representatives and high-profile administrators regrading what they are fighting or working? The constitution, democracy, economic reform, poverty elimination, human rights, or simply for a safe life of every Bangladeshi? Or they are testing their political power in Bangladesh, as it is an ideal lab for experiment?

By power is meant every opportunity or possibility existing within a social relationship, which permits one to carry out one's own will, even against resistance, and regardless of the basis on which this opportunity rests.

Political power is a type of power held by a person or group in society. There are many ways to hold such power. Officially, political power is held by the holders of sovereignty. Political powers are not limited to heads of states, however, and the extent to which a person or group holds such power is related to the amount of societal influence they can wield, formally or informally. In many cases this influence is not contained within a single state.

Power almost always operates reciprocally, but usually not with

Iajuddin solely responsible

In order to create a congenial atmosphere, including making a proper voter list to enable each and every eligible citizen of the country to exercise the right to vote in a participatory election, the president should also immediately refer the matter to the Supreme Court for its opinion or interpretation about the 90 days time limit for completing the process of election, giving the Supreme Court a time limit. Once the opinion of the Supreme Court is available, the president should immediately hand-over the office of the chief advisor to an eligible person, as per the constitutional provision, for organizing a free fair and credible election.

piracy," "vote hijacking" and "media coups" (media manipulation of election results) became part of the country's election culture. As a result of this, the new experiment of installing a non-party caretaker government, headed by the immediate past chief justice of the Supreme Court, was introduced unanimously by the leaders of all political parties in 1991 in order to conduct a generally acceptable free, fair and credible parliamentary election.

Thus the idea of installing a really neutral government was thought of to enable all political parties and candidates contesting the election to campaign freely and equitably, and to ensure that the deficiencies identified in the areas of election related affairs, including preparation of a proper electoral roll, were properly and effectively addressed and the required changes made immediately.

Interestingly the present caretaker government led by Prof Iajuddin Ahmed has, by this time, proved to be a completely different one from the previous caretaker governments. From the very first day of his assuming the office of the chief advisor to the caretaker government, in addition to his presidential office, violating the constitutional provisions, Prof Iajuddin's politically motivated and BNP-Jamat-alliance-oriented actions have been giving a clear-cut signal of his political bias, although he is supposed to be non-political.

Prof Iajuddin, while addressing the secretaries to the government,

suddenly made an immature political statement creating a lot of stir in the political circle as well as the civil society. He told the secretaries that the present form of government had become a "presidential form of government," and underscored his supreme authority over the state and government affairs saying that any unwarranted remarks about his personal assistants were tantamount to interference in the affairs of the state. This was, in fact, violation of his oath as the chief advisor to the caretaker government, and the remark was unconstitutional.

He has adopted the policy of going alone, in violation of the constitutional dictum to exercise his executive power in accordance with the advice of the caretaker government. Thus he has, so far, made it crystal clear that he has been more sincere in following as well as implementing the dictation and advice of the BNP-Jamat alliance, rather than acting as per the decisions and advice of his council of advisors, totally ignoring his supposed to be neutral identity.

Major administrative changes involving the officials directly linked with the election process, starting from secretary to the government down to upazila nirbahi officers and upazila election officials, normally take place with the assumption of office by the non-party caretaker government. Surprisingly, Prof Iajuddin claims to have made a lot of changes, but has kept some key posts like the attorney general, and other politically appointed law officers of his office, DG, NSI, DG, FI, key office holders of chief advi-

sor's office (former PMO) and the president's secretariat undisturbed. According to newspaper reports the administrative changes he has made so far have been done only after receiving clearance from a particular "Bhaban," thereby expressing his full loyalty and allegiance to his party, rather than to his own conscience and his position.

Prof Iajuddin, as the chief advisor of the caretaker government, has so far taken all the major decisions of the government unilaterally, without consulting or discussing with his advisors. The Election Commission, on November 27, announced the schedule of the next parliamentary election in consultation with the chief advisor. Most of the advisors of the caretaker government expressed surprise over the announcement, and said that they had not been informed about it. In fact, Prof Iajuddin asked the election commission to announce the election schedule hastily to meet the demand of BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia, although the advisors were of the view that the controversy surrounding the election schedule could have been avoided if it had been discussed with the political parties and had not been arranged in such a way.

When the country's political crisis took a worsening turn, a team of caretaker advisors took an initiative to resolve the crisis after discussions with the two major political alliances. They were able to frame a package proposal in an effort to bring both the alliances to

the election game. The package proposal, among others, included recasting of the election commission by sending the controversial election commissioners -- SM Zakaria and Modabbir Hossain Chowdhury -- on leave while appointing two new commissioners, one of whom would take charge of the election commission. The package was agreed upon by all the parties, including the Chief Advisor Prof. Iajuddin Ahmed, and there was a real light of hope for a participatory election.

But, suddenly and surprisingly the chief advisor became reluctant to fully implement the package proposal, possibly because of a negative indication from the BNP-Jamat alliance. The advisors had to remain silent, and it was quite embarrassing for them. Prof Iajuddin's partisan colour once again figured prominently, and with that the hope for a participatory election got a real set-back.

The issue of deployment of the army became a subject for discussion even before the caretaker government took office in the flag end of October last year. Prof Iajuddin, during his more than two months stay as chief advisor, has taken such army deployment decision several times, making it a controversial issue. Finally, on December 9, the chief advisor, disregarding strong objections from all the members of his advisory council, ordered army deployment in aid of the civil administration to maintain law and order much ahead of the general election, which was highly welcomed by

BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia. However, this decision by Prof Iajuddin Ahmed in fulfilling the desire of his party, and with total disregard for the request by his advisors, for deployment of army so early (44 days before the election) expedited the resignation of four members of the advisory council -- Akbar Ali Khan, CM Shafi Sami, Hasan Mashud Chowdhury, and Sultana Kamal.

Finally, the appointment of two new election commissioners -- former IGP Modabbir Hossain Chowdhury who aspired to be a BNP candidate for the next election and Saiful Islam a judge of lower judiciary -- without discussion with his council of advisors and political parties has made it abundantly clear that Prof Iajuddin has miserably failed to maintain his neutrality even in selecting non-controversial persons for holding important posts in such a critical moment of our national life.

Therefore, since Prof Iajuddin as the chief advisor of caretaker government has played the main role in creating this political impasse because of his political bias, there is now only one way to resolve this crisis.

In order to create a congenial atmosphere, including making a proper voter list to enable each and every eligible citizen of the country to exercise the right to vote in a participatory election, the president should also immediately refer the matter to the Supreme Court for its opinion or interpretation about the 90 days time limit for completing the process of election, giving the Supreme Court a time limit.

Once the opinion of the Supreme Court is available, the president should immediately hand-over the office of the chief advisor to an eligible person, as per the constitutional provision, for organizing a free fair and credible election.

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Perfect lab for experiment

ban his application. They mentioned that they read about the charges and conviction from the newspaper that was not obviously enough to take this kind of decision.

Like others, the court verdict against the former president was entirely controlled as he refused to make an alliance with 4-party, led by Begum Khaleda Zia, who now wants to keep him off the race. An ideal example of using law and order for personal use and power.

According to the Article 11 of the constitution: "The Republic shall be a democracy in which the fundamental human rights and freedoms and respect for the dignity and worth of the human person shall be guaranteed and in which effective participation by the people through their elected representatives in administration at all levels shall be ensured."

Grand alliance, headed by Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina, finally declared not to participate in the upcoming election because the country's interim government in charge of holding a free and fair election has failed to create a congenial election atmosphere. In addition, a bigger movement will be imposed to oust president Iajuddin from the post of caretaker chief. A countrywide protest

on January 5, followed by transport blockades on January 7 and 8 has been reaffirmed from the grand alliance.

At least 45 Bangladeshis have died and hundreds were injured in political violence since the caretaker government took over to steer the country to the polls. 374 in total have been killed in 2006, compared to 310 in 2005. It marked a 21 percent rise, according to a report of human rights watchdog "Odhikar."

The people of Bangladesh can supersede any laws and regulations, the constitution of Bangladesh says. But in reality, general Bangladeshis are always being superseded by biased and dishonest politicians, officials from election commission, and even by the present interim chief. Probably, Bangladesh needs some more lives to ensure a fruitful result from country's experiment lab for democracy.

On a campaign trail in Gazipur on January 4, Begum Zia urged Bangladeshis not to be misled by the propaganda of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League. She mentioned that they (grand alliance) have ulterior motives.

People of Bangladesh can scarcely ascertain who has ulterior

motives! The BNP, who has manipulated the whole administration during its last tenure and wants the election held on January 22, as per the Election Commission schedule, regardless of who participates in it or not? Or the Awami League, who is undertaking crippling strikes one after the other, and wants to resist vote rigging? Actually they are using the people of Bangladesh as guinea pig and Bangladesh as experimental lab.

Politics is never as simple as it appears. The study of political behaviour explores the various ways citizens can influence government. Voting, joining interest groups and political parties, no discrimination against any citizen and a balance political power are the fundamental necessities of democracy. Experiment with the people of Bangladesh for democracy is now a matter of exchanging power between these political parties. But the people of Bangladesh don't want to be treated as guinea pigs any more.

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Victor's (in)justice

its government's legitimacy, and discredit the occupying powers.

The hanging was ordered by the Supreme Iraqi Criminal Tribunal (SICT), one of several legal arrangements, including a new constitution, imposed upon Iraq by its occupiers.

Mr Hussein deserved to be tried fairly, and punished. But his trial was a farce, which violated norms of fairness. Consider this:

- The US rejected the reasonable demand for an international tribunal, similar to that which tried Milosevic. Washington knew the Iraqi legal system can't deliver justice. Recently, Iraqi judges have pronounced harsh verdicts after 15-minute trials. The New York Times reported: "Almost every aspect of the judicial system is lacking."
- SICT was established by the occupying powers, which rigged its procedures. Most of its judges were imparted special "training" in Britain, an occupying power. SICT wasn't sovereign, impartial or legitimate, says the United Nations' Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, established by the UN Commission on Human Rights.
- WGAD holds that "the deprivation of liberty of Saddam Hussein is arbitrary," in contravention of Article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).
- The accused were denied the elementary right to defend them-

selves. Mr Hussein didn't have unimpeded access to his lawyers, nor adequate facilities to prepare his defence.

- Two of Mr Hussein's lawyers were assassinated. This "seriously undermined his right to defend himself through counsel of his own choosing."
- SICT's first chief judge resigned because of political pressure. Judge Abdel-Rahman, who delivered the final verdict, was shamelessly biased. He abruptly ended the trial in June. He made "statements incompatible with impartiality and the presumption of innocence."
- Mr Hussein couldn't "obtain the attendance and examination of witnesses on his behalf under the same condition as witnesses against him" -- a right the ICCPR guarantees.
- WGAD says it's impossible "to verify whether [the SICT] judges meet the requirements for judicial office, [and] whether their impartiality ... is otherwise undermined."
- Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch say the trial mocked at justice.
- One of Mr Hussein's defence lawyers, former US Attorney-General Ramsey Clark, was ejected from court for saying the trial violated international standards.
- Even before the trial ended,

Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki demanded Mr Hussein's hanging. Then, he declared it would take place before the year ended, thus usurping the judiciary's prerogative. The final procedural clearances were obtained in unseemly haste.

President Bush welcomed the hanging as a "milestone on Iraq's course to becoming a democracy." This will convince the world public -- not just Muslims -- that Washington was complicit in the processes that led to the execution.

Washington invaded and occupied Iraq by inventing lies about mass-destruction weapons. A University of Maryland poll says 78 percent of Iraqis believe US troops are "provoking," not preventing, more conflict; 71 percent want them out.

Sixty-one percent of Iraqis favour attacks on US troops. Under a flourishing insurgency, the average number of daily attacks have risen from 14 in 2003 to 185 now.

The Iraqi regime's writ doesn't run beyond the four-mile-square Green Zone. It's dependent for its survival on two Shia militias, controlled by the ruling coalition's two biggest parties.

The occupation has reduced Iraq's once-prosperous middle-level human development society to penury and disease. About 1.8 million people have fled Iraq (pop

17 million) and 1.6 million have been internally displaced. Over four-fifths of Iraqis say they're worse off now than under Mr Hussein.

This doesn't condone Mr Hussein's gross human rights violations or his perverse, deceptive nationalism. For all his anti-imperialist pretences, he long collaborated with the US, which encouraged him to invade Iran in 1980, and passed on military intelligence to him during that eight-year war.

The West supplied Mr Hussein with components of chemical weapons and looked the other way when he used them.

Mr Hussein was hanged for killing 148 people, but grotesquely, the occupying powers' leaders won't be tried for killing half-a-million Iraqi children through the post-1991 sanctions, nor for the death of 655,000 civilians since the 2003 invasion, estimated by the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health.

Nor will they be brought to justice for the supreme crime of aggression.

Three considerations seem to have motivated Washington to be complicit in Mr Hussein's elimination. The first was to prevent his possible emergence as a power-centre and consummate "regime change."

A second has to do with "exit" plans being discussed in Washington in the light of the Baker-Hamilton report. Iraq's partition along ethnic lines is no longer excluded. A deepening of the Shia-Sunni rift caused by Mr Hussein's hanging could promote this.

However, there was a third, even more pernicious, consideration: to humiliate America's enemies. When Henry Kissinger was asked why he supported the Iraq war, he replied: "Because Afghanistan wasn't enough." In the conflict with "radical Islam," precipitated by 9/11, he said, they want to humiliate us. "And we need to humiliate them."

Many American policymakers share this view. They wanted to create a "demonstration model" out of Mr Hussein to show that America will destroy anyone who flouts its authority.

The international community must strongly deplore these motives. It's not enough to express "disappointment" at Mr Hussein's hanging. The world must unequivocally condemn it, and demand the occupation's end.

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Two little states in Palestine?

ABDULLAH ISKANDAR

HAMAS'S victory-like language cannot hide the fact that the final outcome of its government is very negative, both at the political level and with regard to the living conditions of the Palestinian people.

For his part, President Abbas has announced that he has the right to decide, and in doing so, he was backed by Fatah's leaders. Nevertheless, this announcement cannot conceal the great dangers that early legislative elections imply.

At the same time, long months of negotiations and talks among the two movements, the presidency and the government, have shown that many political and personal complications are hampering the formation of a national unity government.

The latest deadlock has demonstrated that it does not take much effort to make the country slip into violent confrontations. Similarly, as experience has revealed, commissions, ceasefires, investigations and calls for self-restraint have not led to any effective result that may prevent resorting to arms.

Moreover, the periods of calm and negotiations are not taken advantage of by any of the two parties with the objective of convincing each other of the inviolability of Palestinian blood.

The most optimistic observers do not rule out that the Palestinian situation is dominated by truces interrupted by clashes, while the realistic ones believe that the country is quickly moving toward confrontation.

In the meantime, maneuvers, tactical slogans and conduct will intensify, and they, themselves, could cause more division. As a result, contending parties will forget the fundamental causes of this Palestinian internal division, and they will all believe that their victory requires the defeat of the other.

The internal Palestinian impasse is linked to the stalemate of the peace process, for which Israel is responsible. While the President believes that abiding by agreements, stopping violence, and returning to negotiations could break this deadlock, Hamas says that resistance is what will force Israel to put an end to its hostility.

Nonetheless, the two parties have failed to forge a shared power relying on the concept of the two States, which is what the agreements are based on, as well as on the concept of maintaining their right to all forms of resistance. Because of the lack of the ways to negotiate, this failure has strengthened the Palestinian capability to find the means to put pressure on Israel, in order to return to negotiations and make it recognize the Palestinian partner.

Also, it has reinforced the capability of starting a confrontation on the ground, and of spreading such opposition politically, thanks to foreign commitments.

Abu Mazen has tried to break this deadlock by announcing early elections. He has imposed on himself presidential polls that concern his right to resign, and has imposed legislative elections on other factions, especially Hamas, which refuse this step.

The goal could be to increase the pressure on the Islamic movement in order to convince it of the conditions for the formation of a unity government -- conditions that are linked to the crisis affecting the peace process. Also, the objective could go back to the voters in order to separate the two parties, while Hamas thinks it does not need such return until its legislative mandate is over.

The tactical goal has not been achieved; on the contrary, divisions have increased and a violent confrontation has been triggered. Subsequent efforts will now be made in order to absorb the aftermaths of such confrontation, to convince the parties to calm down, to withdraw gunmen from the streets, and to avoid clashes.

After all this, negotiations, whose details have totally been consumed over the last months, will have to be resumed.

Despite everything, going to the polls will destroy any attempts to reach a cooling-off, given the fact that Hamas is holding onto its gains from the previous elections. In this case, each party will impose its presence in its region of main influence: Hamas in Gaza to prevent the elections, and Fatah in the West Bank to impose them.

This scenario implies the danger of a geographical division between two authorities, and two little states opposed to each other in terms of ideology, policy, and goals. In less than a year, the Palestinians are achieving what Israel has been unable to do since its foundation.