

The perils of over-reach

The Bangladesh armed services -- as elsewhere -- implement their enduring core corporate interests of being the ultimate guarantors of national sovereignty by cultivating an image of competent professionalism and neutrality to seek and retain the public confidence that's absolutely vital for them to do their job properly. By continuing to support the CA's questionable policies through aid to civil power, the army's cherished reputation of being neutral and above partisan politics was endangered.

MUMTAZ IQBAL

"No battle plan survives the first contact with the enemy." Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, Chief of the General Staff, Prussian/German Armies Army 1863---1888

Empires often implode or explode because of imperial over-reach, when their resources can't sustain their imperial commitments (David Kennedy: The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers).

LESSER institutions such as political parties are also not immune from this fate if their policies and activities make them unbalanced and vulnerable to their opponents' efforts.

BNP must be reflecting on the validity of this conclusion after President Iajuddin's January 11 speech announcing the Emergency, his and his advisers' resignation, appointment of a fresh chief adviser (CA) and ten advisers, conceded faults in the voters list and de facto postponed the January 22 elections.

This abrupt volte-face is due to the interrelated factors of BNP's over-reach and its various opponents' response

BNP's over-reach

BNP's battle plan was deceptively simple: to grab state power at all costs. It created an uneven electoral plying field filled with potholes.

BNP motivation partly came from AL's acts of omission and commission when it was last in power, so that AL is not entirely blameless for these potholes. AL discovered to its chagrin that what goes can come around, with a vengeance!

Empirical and anecdotal evidence indicates that the BNP and allies through their prolonged and calculated machinations made fiefdoms of the presidency, key parts of the bureaucracy, judiciary and police (Pajeros provided to SPs and ADCs just before BNP relinquished power?), Election Commission (EC), and the caretaker government (CG).

Iajudding making himself the CA was bad enough because of its dubious legality. What inflamed the political environment was his breath-taking series of biased stunts and somersaults brazenly executed unilaterally at BNP's behest.

CA Iajuddin finally crossed a bridge too far when he insisted on 8 January 8 that the elections would be held January 22 come what may

as this was constitutionally mandated. In this, he parroted the top BNP leadership (Khaleda, Bhuiya, Moudud, et al) were proclaiming loudly in public.

BNP's pious protestations they were defending the Constitution, after having ravished it earlier, is touching but, if you will pardon the expression, pure bull. What pleasure BNP would have got sleeping with a "living corpse" (Umrao Jan movie line) had it won the one-sided elections defies logic!

Opposition response

AL alliance's (Alliance) stick and carrot policy of demonstrations and accommodation to level the playing field foundered against the BNP's iron grip on the state machinery. The Alliance then upped the ante on January 3 by boycotting the elections and announcing tough street action over January 7-9 that was fairly easily contained by the security forces, with both sides emerging with honour reasonably intact and satisfied.

At January 10 public meeting, the Alliance announced a further set of staggered blockades and hartals culminating in the prospect of severe disturbances on election day.

Astonishingly, the CG and BNP were not put off their stride, calcu-

lating the Alliance lacked the stamina to sustain its protests.

But where the BNP really gambled was in assuming that the armed services would grumble but obey, and the diplomats make the ritual protest, but ultimately neither would go against its plan to ram through the elections as scheduled.

On both these counts, the BNP over-reached and proved to be too clever by half. BNP made the services and diplomats their opponents when it wasn't really necessary and ensured its temporary self-destruction.

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By continuing to support the CA's questionable policies through aid to civil power, the army's cherished reputation of being neutral and above partisan politics was endangered.

The possibility that the peace-keeping bonanza could be threatened played a role, subsidiary but not inconsiderable, in the services evaluation of events.

BNP's reckless obstinacy alienated the diplomats, especially the US. On January 8, after letting the UK do the running initially, Washington decided at last to stop pussy-footing and make clear it's growing annoyance and displeasure at BNP's tactics.

US Ambassador Butenis stated bluntly that a one-sided election wouldn't be acceptable. Other donors echoed this. The knife was



PHOTOS: AFP

plunged deeper when international observers said on January 10 that they would pack up and go home rather than observe a farcial election.

Events then moved fast. US Assistant Secretary of State Nicholas Burns telephoned CA Iajuddin to express American concerns. Constitutional barrister Kamal Hossain's raising the spectre of bloodshed suggested

things were rapidly sliding out of control, a factor that may have had influenced the diplomats to conclude that the iron fist had to be revealed under the velvet gloves.

New UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon also threw his weight on January 11 by announcing that Bangladesh's participation in peacekeeping operations would be endangered unless elections were fair and transparent.

Under this combined overseas onslaught, the three services chief told CA Iajuddin on 11 January morning that the game was up, and he'd better quit to stave off anarchy and economic collapse. He wisely capitulated.

Will history consider Iajuddin to be to Khaleda what Archbishop Becket was to King Henry II? It really doesn't matter. But to paraphrase Shakespeare, nothing in

the CA's life became him the like the manner of his leaving it (power, that is).

With Fakhruddin Ahmed as the new CA, we have in effect a Meiji-style government where the emperor reigns but the shogun rules.

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The world according to America

The world, according to America, should do its bidding. What is good for America is good for the world. For American prowess provides the world the margin of safety and security. At no place, and under no circumstances, should this be questioned. A leader should naturally have the privilege of formulating an agenda for the world. America, therefore, knows what is best for the world. After all, things, ideas, innovations and advancements of excellent order are only made in America.

SYED MAQSUD JAMIL

THE world has a "love-hate" relationship with America. This ambivalent involvement continues in spite of many remarkable and major developments: man's landing on the moon, the debacle in Vietnam, the opening of China, and recently the Iraqi misadventure.

America is the ultimate in many things mankind does and the modern world needs.

Most countries blame America either openly or in guarded tones. Yet the nations of this world cannot do without America -- often a bumbling superpower. America knows that it runs the world.

The high-tech, growth-hungry world looks up to it. Be it in computer technology, the latest armaments or as a potential market for consumer goods.

This eminence began with America's successful leadership in World War II. Since then it has become a general perception of the American people that there is nothing like America.

Naturally, its government looks on the world as a legitimate extension of its influence. The affairs of the world are America's business. America, the final arbiter, determines the rights and wrongs of the world. These may not fit into the founding values of modern civilization. It is judged by the simplistic expedience that so long as the geo-political interest and convenience of America is upheld, it is right, and when it does not, it is wrong.

The logic is made in America. It is a world, according to America. Every American President is armed with a gospel of vindication -- what

we know as doctrines.

Post-war president, Harry S Truman, was resolute in drawing the line against communism. His was the doctrine of containment. America got the UN to support its mission in Korea. President Johnson vigorously pursued the "Domino Theory" on the premise that the fall of a country to communism will create a ripple effect and cause the fall of its neighbours. It led to a protracted and vengeful military campaigns in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. America, in trying to form a bulwark of puppet regimes, lost its sons and brutalized the region. In addition to military casualties, hundreds of thousands of innocent Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians lost their lives. The human toll was well over one million.

Now Vietnam has embraced free market economy for external trade, but it remains a totalitarian one-party communist state. America is warmly courting Vietnam. It, however, does not talk of establishing democracy there. President Reagan turned the spotlight on Soviet Russia, sensing its economic constraints. However, benign as he was, with a sunny and charming personality, he was equally truculent in invading the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada, and in abducting President Manuel Noriega of Panama. Only America reserves the right to take such liberties.

Bin Laden was America's adoptee when he funneled his money and recruits into Afghanistan. He dug in with the full knowledge of America -- a "made in America" Jihadi. After 9/11 he became the firebrand terrorist to be hunted down. The guns that pinned

down Afghanistan in permanent bondage to terror were supplied by America. Pakistan was the conduit, and the guns went to the Mujahedin and to the Taliban. The Taliban were raised and patronized with the full knowledge and support of America.

The Taliban ruled Afghanistan with impunity for over five years, until they fell due to their Bin Laden connection. Afterwards, Hamid Karzai was brought from exile in America and made the president of Afghanistan. He has neither of the two ties that matter in Afghanistan: a Mujahedin in the fight against the Soviets or a strong constituency among the clans. That is beside the matter, so long as the 18,000-strong American military contingent is there to guard the regime. He is holed up in Kabul.

The Afghan campaign is into its sixth year, yet the prospect of an Afghan government in control, and the withdrawal of American troops, looks remote. How practical is it to think that western style of democracy will take root in a country bound in clan loyalties, and with no history of democratic experience?

America's response has all along been so circuitous. It is difficult to believe that democracy is its global agenda. Algeria presents a different scenario. America's response to the Algerian army's arbitrary action of denying the landslide victory of the Islamic Salvation Front at the polls was that of detached disinterest. It is yet to accept the electoral victory of Hamas at the Palestinian polls.

There are very few instances where the rationale behind America's global adventure had righteous indignation in it. The most notable example was the Gulf War of 1991, where the stand of the

senior Bush was morally acceptable. He could see the perils of overkill, and was discreet enough not to pursue Saddam up to Baghdad.

His son, however, did. His is the doctrine of pre-emption. He proceeded in a cavalier fashion to hunt the lion in winter with a pretext that did not exist. The possible theories for his war against Iraq are: one, he wanted to use the attack to help consolidate his domestic position after 9/11, and the other is that America wanted to dominate the oil resources of Iraq. Whatever be the motive, the American mission has cost over 600,000 Iraqi lives. The human toll continues.

America could preach the gospel of their rights and wrongs because they have rid their own country of destabilizing problems. The native Red Indians, presumably 10 million at the time of discovery, have been liquidated. Only the Spanish conquistadors can match them in the ferocity with which the natives of the two continents were dealt with. In Machu Pichu, Peru, nearly two million indigenous Indians perished to 300 conquistadors.

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Notice:

A photo of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman with his daughter Sheikh Hasina published on January 12 in this page was missing its credit line. We regret this mistake. The photo is from Drik Photo Archive.

Ban takes UN reins

IMRAN KHALID

THE last few days of Kofi Annan's tenure as the seventh UN secretary general saw the traditionally strained US-UN relations dip to its lowest ebb -- with a tinge of a personality clash between Mr Annan and President Bush.

Rarely in the past has such a direct collision of personalities characterized US-UN relations to this extent. The second term of Annan's tenure was particularly blemished by the yawning gap between the White House and the UN secretariat.

To a large extent, the blame for this unsavory situation can be traced to the belligerent Bush agenda, which has little respect for the world body as the chief arbitrator and conciliator of the global political system.

A visibly frustrated Annan, who was reduced to a mere spectator to passively watch Bush's misadventures in Afghanistan, Iraq and other places across the globe, was unable to arrest the erosion of influence of the United Nations as the most respected body to keep the global political system on the right track.

Kofi Annan's failure was three-pronged. On the one hand, he failed to implement and execute the much-touted structural, administrative and management reforms at the United Nations even after spending one decade at the helm of affairs.

Secondly, the findings of corruption and mismanagement in the \$64 billion oil-for-food program for Iraq, and in UN procurements, was the most damaging stroke that raised questions about Kofi Annan's competence in running his organization properly.

At the same time, he could not build or develop tangible influence and clout -- despite the obvious anti-Washington attitude of Moscow and Beijing -- at the world body to counter and muffle the belligerency of the Bush camp that consistently exhibited disdain for



the UN throughout his tenure.

Being the major financial contributor to the UN, the United States used dual pressure on the UN secretariat: putting restrictions on release of funds to the UN in the first place, and then asking the insolvent world body to show progress on the reforms to qualify for the release of the remaining money.

In December 2005, the UN member states approved the biennium (2006-2007) budget but, under the influence of the United States, the UN secretariat was authorized to use just enough money to meet the day-to-day operational costs till June 2006, with a condition that the spending cap would only be lifted when there was significant progress on the UN reforms.

Interestingly, this "significant progress" was not clearly defined to either side. This was another offensive maneuver by the United

States to apparently snub Kofi Annan who had been indirectly criticizing the Bush foreign policy for quite some time.

How could an indigent UN move towards the mammoth project of reforms when it did not have enough money to run its day-to-day operations? "The US is trying to use the power of the purse to force through the badly needed management reforms, and these tactics have provoked a reaction among the developing countries," is how Kofi Annan reacted to the US role in manipulating the release of funds to the United Nations.

So, a dejected Kofi Annan had to eventually leave the stage with little progress on his much-cherished dream of management and organizational reforms at the United Nations.

This is from where Ban Ki-Moon has to start his innings as the eighth UN secretary general. Kofi Annan has left a legacy of

helplessness and ineptitude -- though the credit for this goes directly to the cantankerous attitude of the White House -- that failed to assert the pre-eminence of the world body in the face of a unipolar global power structure.

The American belligerency is a reality, and Ban will have to live with this.

UN reforms are what the world desperately needs for an "efficient and just" global political system at this juncture, and Ban has no other choice but to push through these reforms as quickly as possible.

He will have to learn from the ineptness of his predecessor who could not entice the Bush camp to a compromise formula on the question of UN reforms. The fact of the matter is that, while controlling the strings of purse, the United States has always been in a dictating position to maneuver the UN as per its requirements.

It is fairly difficult for any secretary general to build a pressure group to mollify the American stance on the key strategic issues like the UN reforms.

Ban Ki-Moon, who has pragmatically opined that he would try to strike a balance between his role as political leader and as administrative leader, is in a relatively better position to find a soft corner at the White House.

He is reported to have some good friends in Washington as well as Beijing that will make it easier for him to execute the daunting agenda that includes the threats of nuclear proliferation, terrorism, chronic flashpoints, human rights and UN reforms.

His major challenge, however, will be to inveigle the United States to shed its belligerent attitude and get positively involved in the UN reforms to resuscitate the world body from apparent dilapidation.

Expectations are high of this low-key and soft-spoken career diplomat to strike the right chords at the White House to find a breathing space for himself as well as his moribund organization.