

Political bankruptcy: A threat to state sovereignty

It is only our bankrupt political parties, not the foreign powers, which need to be blamed, because it is they who have brought us down to the position we are in now. It is our mindless politicians who have brought the nation to its knees to beg for foreign help to end our political feud.

MATIUR RAHMAN

OUR major political parties, only because of their lust for power, have thrust the nation into a state of emergency. Their arrogant behavior, stubborn policies, and senseless actions over the last several months have not only caused indescribable sufferings to the millions of innocent citizens at home, but have also raised a huge uproar in the international community.

Therefore, some citizens heaved a sigh of relief at the promulgation of emergency by the president, hoping for an end to the unrelenting blockades, hartals, and street violence that had resulted in the loss of many lives and complete paralysis of normal life in most cities, including Dhaka.

Others, however, are concerned about the suspension of certain constitutional rights and freedom due to the imposed state of emergency.

The current situation in our country is the product of our two major political alliances, led by none other than the two most inefficient, corrupt and arrogant parties in our political scene today.

Their ineptness is ruining the democratic institutions and bringing the country close to an economic disaster. Their political bankruptcy is not only hampering our progress toward the path of democracy and good governance, but is also threatening our state sovereignty in a subtle way.

Western diplomats in Dhaka have recently been so openly engaged in our political arena that many of our conscientious intellectuals seriously questioned their role in our domestic matters, while some others found it justifiable in order to "protect and promote democracy" through "free and fair elections."

When the political turmoil turned into a national crisis, the western

diplomats started well-publicized visits to the palaces of all three major stakeholders for state power -- one former president and two former prime ministers -- in order to make them agree on a solution to the crisis, apparently.

While it may be argued that the intervention of foreign diplomats was necessary in order to overcome the impasse that had existed, there are other consequences of this issue that need to be seriously considered.

Furthermore, just a few days before the declaration of emergency, when the grand alliance led by Awami League declared its decision to "boycott and resist at any cost" the parliamentary elections slated for January 22, all of the powerful western players, such as US, UK, EU, and even UN, announced almost in one voice, and rightly so, that elections in such a situation would not be acceptable to them as legitimate.

Additionally, they also threatened that if the government of Bangladesh went ahead with a "one-sided" election in the face of boycott by Awami League et al, they would cut off trade and other vital transactions with Bangladesh.

Moreover, the highest world body, the UN, threatened that Bangladesh's participation in the prestigious Blue Helmet peace-keeping mission would be jeopardized unless "free and fair elections with participation of all parties" were ensured by the government of Bangladesh.

For a country that is still largely dependent on foreign aid and favorable trade relationships with the West, such a threat was unnerving for the government and the BNP-led alliance, but very comforting for the grand alliance, for obvious reasons.

The justification given by the western diplomats for such a stance is that in today's intertwined world of economy, politics and national security, a democratic

Bangladesh is in the interest of their governments, hence their intervention in our politics is not only legitimate, but also necessary, to make sure that their "tax-payers' money" was not wasted.

This simply means that what the West is doing with respect to our political shenanigans is for the protection of their legitimate interests only, and not meddling in our internal business. If that is true, then who can blame these diplomats who are out there to protect and promote their own interests on behalf of their people?

That's what they are bound to do, they say and we agree, and they are doing it very truthfully from the perspective of their national interests, no matter if some of their actions go against the interests of others.

Ever since the beginning of the system of posting of emissaries to foreign nations, diplomats of the rich and powerful nations have meddled in the politics of the weak and poor countries, and manipulated the leaders of the host countries to their advantage.

However, until recently, such foreign interference in domestic affairs of the host countries used to be carried out in a very covert way under the curtain of diplomacy.

But, nowadays, the principles and realities of "global economy," "global trade," "global terrorism," and "global community" have given the rich nations an avenue for direct and overt "pre-emptive interventions" in the otherwise domestic matters of the host countries.

Since the powerful countries of the West consider such interventions not only legitimate but also necessary for their own national interest, and for a healthy world community, they have been quite successful in convincing the most influential world bodies such as UN and EU. And the weak and poor countries now have only two choices -- to obey the powerful masters or face political and eco-

nomic death penalty.

While the ever-expanding interdependence of countries, in trade, technology, communication, international diplomacy and global cooperation to combat terrorism, is understood to be a necessary aspect of world politics today, this well intentioned interdependence, however, does not at all mean that one nation has to depend on another for managing its own internal politics.

But both of our major parties are relying on foreign assistance to ascend to state power -- they are openly courting the West, and practically competing against one other to earn the favor and blessings of the western diplomats to fulfill their selfish goals.

Since nothing is free, and in this world of give-and-take bargains, our political parties have to give their foreign benefactors something in return. But, what do our political parties have that they can give to the foreign countries, except trading our national interest for their own political gains?

Nothing else could be more treacherous, shameful and pitiful to a nation, and nothing else could bring a more dangerous threat to state sovereignty than this.

It is only our bankrupt political parties, not the foreign powers, which need to be blamed, because it is they who have brought us down to the position we are in now. It is our mindless politicians who have brought the nation to its knees to beg for foreign help to end our political feud.

The leaders of both rival political groups have been the heads of our government in the recent past, but have they ever dared to send their own ambassadors to the Democratic and Republican parties in Washington, or to the Labor and Conservative parties in London, to mediate in their political differences?

If they had ever tried that, their ambassadors would certainly have been immediately kicked out and sent back home. Now, does this say something to our politicians about what sovereignty and intervention in domestic affairs mean, and what the self-respect for a nation, and its leaders in lofty political positions, actually imply?



Will they ever understand what damage they are doing to our country, or do they even know what they are doing?

Territorial integrity of a nation is just one aspect of state sovereignty, but the internal political anarchy in our country is causing slow but sure erosion of our practical sovereignty, and may jeopardize our territorial sovereignty one day if we are not cautious and watchful now and always.

Polity, by virtue of its enormously important role in a state, requires that the political parties have broad vision and farsightedness in order to guide the nation toward the right direction, and to consolidate its progress and prosperity.

The questions before the nation now are: are our politicians doing what they are supposed to do to protect and promote our interests at home and abroad? Do they even care about the interests of the masses, and put the nation above themselves and their parties? Can we trust these headless leaders

and their parties to run our country anymore?

If the answer to the above questions was not an overwhelming "yes," then what should we really do to fix our broken house? Do we need a complete overhaul of our political system, or do we keep the same old political parties, and their offshoots, with outdated ideas and no vision for the future?

The nation has heard both leaders parroting empty rhetoric for too long already, and seen them breaking their promises in broad daylight too many times. So, can we still realistically expect these parties to transform themselves, and their leaders to change themselves to become worthy of our trust and respect, without Aladdin's magic lamp?

We have seen our leaders and their activists fighting in full riot gear against the people's interests on the streets of Dhaka and elsewhere we have seen them keep the nation hostage for their own political ambitions, we have seen them not behaving like civilized human beings until a state of emergency was imposed on the nation.

We have seen them fighting endlessly until their foreign masters told them to stop, we have seen them selling our national interests like mad traders for their personal gains, we have seen them wasting our country's meager resources like drunken gamblers.

What else does the poor nation need to experience before we tell them "goodbye," respectfully, and send them to a happy retirement?

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Time for the US to recognize Iraq's humanitarian crisis

ROBERTA COHEN AND ASHRAF AL-KHALIDI

THE State Department's weekly report on how the United States government is meeting its goals in Iraq omits an important category -- emergency aid for the millions of people forcibly uprooted inside the country, or who have fled across borders to escape sectarian violence and coalition military operations.

Since Shi'a restraint ended in February following the bombing of the holy Shi'a shrine in Samarra, Shi'a and Sunni armed groups have been driving 50,000 people from their homes each month.

To date, more than a half a million have been forced out, with Sunni and Shi'a, as well as Christians, Kurds and other religious and ethnic groups fleeing to areas where their own group is in the majority.

Not only is this changing the social and demographic makeup of many Iraqi cities, and undermining any potential for a multiethnic/religious democratic state, it is also causing a grave humanitarian crisis.

Tens of thousands now living in public buildings, parks, cemeteries,

and soccer fields are in urgent need of shelter, food, medicine and clean water. While the majority stays with families and friends, they, too, face extreme hardship because they are without homes and jobs, and their hosts are running out of resources.

Billions in international funds have been allocated for recovery and development projects in Iraq, most of which cannot be implemented because of the violence.

Yet humanitarian programs have been largely neglected. The assumption that the domestic situation would stabilize, and that the displaced of Iraq would return home, has been proved terribly wrong. A reassessment of donor priorities is urgently needed.

Indeed, people are increasingly turning to armed groups for security, rather than the government, because they are the ones that protect neighborhoods and provide relief.

Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi army, at present, is driving most Sunni families out of eastern Baghdad. In the Huriyah district, which is only about 3 miles from the Green Zone, the government is doing little to protect the Sunnis from expulsion.

The armed groups are connected to political parties, which use them to maximize their own power. Members of government security forces and the police often assist the Mahdi army, while Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki must rely on al-Sadr who controls 30 seats in the parliament.

The Iraqi government does not have the resources, will or competence to adequately aid the displaced. A November Pentagon

report points to a social safety-net programme being developed by the government, but then points out that the "legislation required for this initiative has not yet been introduced."

While local authorities, the Iraqi Red Crescent and mosques are reported to be more effective, it is the sectarian radical agencies that are filling the void left by the government.

International aid does not yet reflect the seriousness of the situation. The Iraq budget of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the lead UN agency in Iraq, has in fact been reduced from \$150 million in 2003 to \$29 million in 2006.

The agency reports being "sorely lacking in funds" to cope with the growing number of displaced Iraqis.

Aid is also urgently needed for the more than 1.8 million Iraqis who have fled across the border, among them 700,000 to Jordan and 600,000 to Syria.

Although initially welcomed by these countries as "Arab brothers," they are becoming burdensome as their numbers increase. Jordan's government, which calls them "illegal immigrants" rather than refugees from violence and persecution, has returned some to Iraq, and has not asked other governments to help share the burden.

Syria considers them "tourists" and "guests," and most cannot work. In Lebanon, they are under threat of deportation.

The United States must encourage countries of refuge to recognize those fleeing Iraq as refugees, mobilize the international support needed to help them, and itself consider bringing increased numbers of Iraqis under its refugee resettlement programme.

It is time for the Bush Administration to recognize and address the serious humanitarian crisis that its actions in Iraq have spawned.

The most immediate need is to ensure that the UN refugee agency and the other international agencies involved in helping Iraq's displaced, such as the International Organization for Migration, have the funds and access they need to do the job.

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President Bush's irreconcilable attitude on Iraq

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I cannot resist the temptation to offer my hats-off to the president of the United States, George W Bush for his steadfast and unshakeable determination to continue the course is whatever might be the consequences.

This has been reflected in a nationwide televised speech on January 9, when the president signaled to send an additional 21,500 soldiers to Iraq to stabilize the situation there.

It is really amazing to note the decision of the president at a time when commanders in the field, like General John Abizaid and General George Casey, are not in favour of sending more troops to Iraq.

In this case, the president has deviated from his previous rhetoric that he would listen to commanders on the ground when it comes to troop levels.

Instead of listening to the advice of his commanders or reports by the Iraq Study Group led by James Baker, former secretary of state under his father and Lee Hamilton, former chairman of Senate foreign relations committee, the president is going ahead to escalate the fluid situation in Iraq.

While admitting a flawed strategy after three and a half years of invasion of Iraq, President Bush proposed to send additional troops to stabilize in Baghdad and Anbar province.

He also urged the puppet Iraqi administration of Nouri al-Maliki to make serious efforts to take security measures and reforms. But the president indicates no timetable for the withdrawal of troops. This is ridiculous indeed.

The speech, however, gives some impression that President Bush took the report of the Iraq Study Group seriously as he planned to add \$414 million to expand provincial reconstruction teams, \$400 million for quick response fund, and \$350 million for field commanders to solve local problems.

On the other hand, President Bush is going to take diametrically opposite actions against Iran and Syria despite the Iraq Study Group's recommending having dialogue with Iran and Iraq to defuse violence in Iraq.

In the speech, the President promised to step up operations to interrupt the imaginary flow of support from Iraq's two neighbours

and to seek out and destroy networks providing weapons and training to US enemies in Iraq.

It is more interesting to note that the president does not care about the verdict of the voters in the November congressional elections that handed power to the Democratic Party in 12 years.

The verdict was loud and clear: end the war in Iraq and leave.

The unabated violence and killing of American troops has turned majority of the Americans against the president.

It has been projected in the polls conducted by Washington Post-ABC News immediately after the speech that 61 percent of the Americans opposed the president's plan to send additional troops. This report appeared on January 10.

The decision to send additional American troops to Iraq, despite strong opposition from Congress and Americans, including anti-war groups, has evoked a negative response from the leadership of Democratic Party, which now controls the Congress.

Congressman Chris is reported to have said: "By calling for the rapid escalation of American troops in Iraq, the President rebuffed his commanders, thumbed his nose at the Baker-Hamilton commission, and worst of all, ignored the will of the American people."

Interestingly, some Republican senators and representatives are not in agreement with the president on the Iraq issue. Republican Senator Chuck Hagel, for example, is of the opinion that "the plan

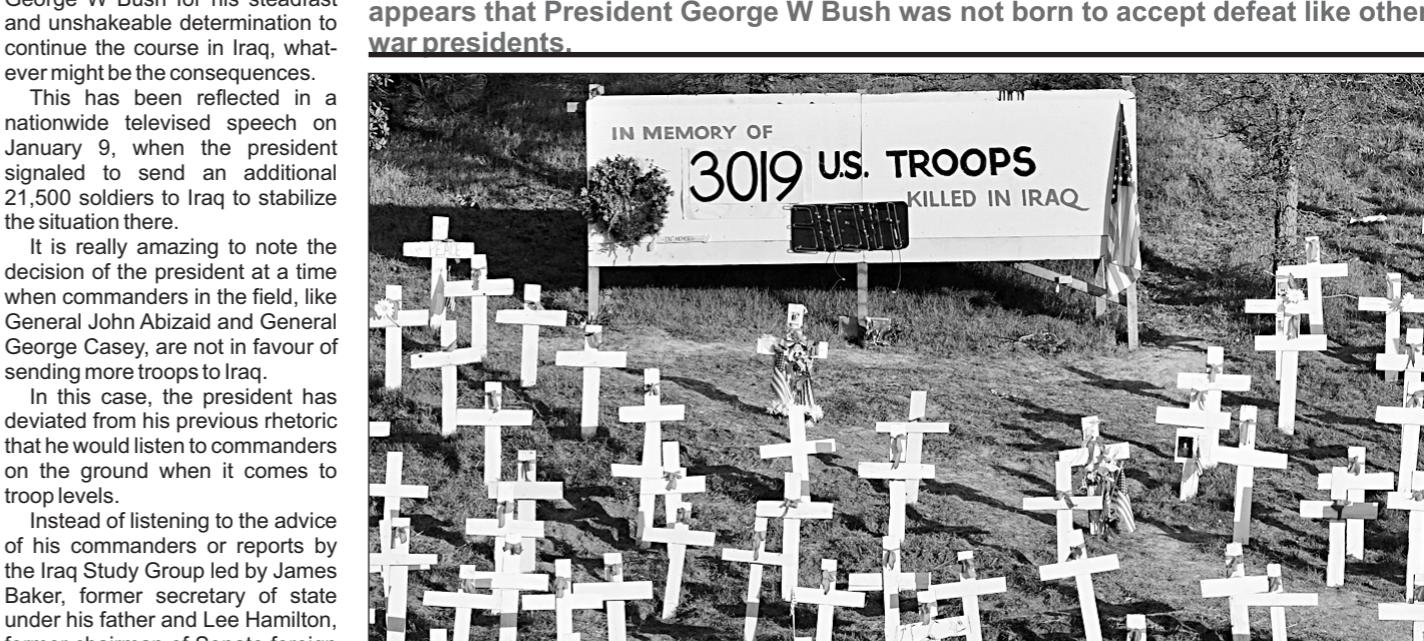
would be the most dangerous foreign policy blunder in the country since Vietnam -- if it is carried out."

Republican Representative Ric Keller said injecting more young American troops into the crossfire of an Iraqi civil war is simply not the right approach.

This being the scenario in the Congress and considering the pressure from anti-war groups, the president will face undoubtedly tough days ahead. Since the commanders on the ground did not subscribe to the president's grandiose idea to surge troops after three and a half years, they are being fired.

Despite the lowest rating approval of handling the situation in Iraq and a negative response from the Congress, President Bush's strategy in the new bottle is his last card to win in Iraq.

It appears that President George W Bush was not born to accept defeat like other war presidents.



House of Representatives, along with Senate majority leader Harry Reid, have made it clear that the president will not have blank cheques to pursue his uncharted mission or hidden agenda in Iraq.

Senator Edward Kennedy, meanwhile, has given the impression that without further authorization from the congress, no additional troops will be allowed to move to Iraq to fight civil war.

Possibly, the best response came from Congressman Chris Van Hollen, who has been appointed new chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

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