

The road ahead

The state of emergency has given the caretaker government a unique opportunity to carry out these jobs in a peaceful atmosphere. They must not, however, lose sight of the fact that emergency cannot be a long-term measure. It does not go well with any election process or, for that matter, with any democratic process. If the caretaker government is there mainly to create a congenial atmosphere for holding a free, fair, and credible election and hand over power to an elected government, it must dispense with the emergency measure sooner or later. The earlier it goes, the better.

HUSAIN IMAM

THE country's ninth parliamentary election, scheduled to be held on January 22, has been postponed. It might as well be cancelled. The leaders of the 4-party coalition left no stone unturned to make us believe that if the election was not held on time, i.e. by January 22, our constitution, our democracy, everything, would be at stake.

They raised a hue and cry that the whole sky would fall on our heads if the date for election was

changed. Divided, as we are, some of our political pundits, constitutional wizards, legal experts, and veteran journalists, mostly belonging to Jatiyatabadi camp, also joined the chorus.

That the election is not going to be held on January 22, or within the stipulated 90 days period, is a foregone conclusion. The president has declared a state of emergency, resigned from the post of CA and appointed Dr Fakhrudin Ahmed, an eminent bureaucrat-cum-banker, as the new CA.

The Election Commission has postponed all electoral activities until January 25, paving the way for a free, fair, and credible election which can be participated in by all the major political parties, and can be accepted by all at home and abroad. Surprisingly, nothing has happened. Neither has the sky fallen on our heads, nor has our most talked about constitution vanished through the window. What is the reason?

The answer is simple. The people of this country wanted this to happen and it has happened, proving once again that the consti-

tution is for the people, not the people for the constitution.

The sad thing is, our rulers and their sycophants forget it at their convenience, and every time they forget the people prove it by shedding their blood on the streets. At least 75 people have lost their lives, and several hundred were injured this time, not to mention the untold suffering the general public had to endure to establish their right for a free franchise.

Let me take this opportunity to congratulate President Iajuddin Ahmed for the historic role he seems to have finally decided to play in upholding the rights of the common people, never mind about the big mistakes he had committed earlier.

We understand that the members of our valiant armed forces, and the foreign diplomats and development partners, had a significant role behind this initiative. We are grateful to them. They have surely saved this country

from the hands of some unscrupulous self-seekers who were out there to lead this country to total chaos and confusion in the name of the constitution and to serve their own interests.

We also welcome Dr Fakhrudin Ahmed, former governor of Bangladesh Bank, as the new chief of the caretaker government, given his excellent academic record and his varied career as a senior bureaucrat-cum-banker serving at home and abroad. Because of his reputation as a thorough gentleman of integrity, we are confident that he will probably do more than his best to discharge his responsibility with utmost sincerity, honesty, and neutrality so that his government can create a truly congenial atmosphere for holding a free, fair and credible election.

We had four major obstacles to holding a free, fair and credible election:

- The president himself occupy-

ing the post of CA.

- A highly controversial and incompetent Election Commission.

- A shockingly flawed voter list.

- A nakedly politicized civil and police administration.

The president has removed the first obstacle. Now he has to remove the second one. The entire Election Commission has to be reconstituted fully and comprehensively.

All the existing commissioners, including their chief and self-proclaimed acting chief, must not only resign, making room for a new set of persons to take over, but must also remain available for giving an account for more than Tk 100 crore of the taxpayers' money which they have wasted in making a flawed voter list.

Once this hurdle is crossed, we can possibly borrow some words from a popular advertisement of our TV channels and tell the president to have a sound sleep, using

some mustard oil in his nostrils, leaving the other two hurdles for the caretaker government to settle.

Everybody will probably agree with me that the first and foremost job for this caretaker government, once the Election Commission is reconstituted, is to assist the Election Commission in the preparation of voter ID cards and a flawless voter list in the shortest possible time. A huge amount of time, energy and money has already been wasted in this regard without any positive outcome, which is probably one of the main causes for the postponement of the election. There is no scope for any more lapses in this regard.

The other important task for the caretaker government, apart from recovering illegal arms and maintaining law and order, is to drastically de-politicize, more appropriately neutralize, the entire police and civil administration. It may also be necessary for them to

undertake some reform measures of our electoral laws, taking into consideration the various demands and proposals of our civil society and the political parties.

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A stagger more than a surge

Recent polls show that it's a tough sell. The latest Gallup poll for USA Today shows that 36 percent approve of the idea of "a temporary but significant" troop increase; 61 percent oppose the idea. The White House believes those kinds of numbers will decline once the president makes his case and rallies a Republican base, that has drifted away from him in recent months, on the issue of Iraq. Those are bad numbers. But all is not lost for the White House by any means -- no matter what the pundits say.

RICHARD WOLFFE AND HOLLY BAILEY

ramp-up of troops more of a stagger than a surge.

The administration is also giving benchmarks to the prime minister himself. Maliki needs to move forward with his own promises of reconciliation, especially when it comes sharing oil revenues between the regions, and rehabili-

ment."

In a sense, the president's challenge is the same as the Iraqi prime minister's: to restore his credibility. To that end, Bush's aides say that a key part of the speech will be about conceding past failures, as well as the disappointments and shortcomings of the current situ-

ation.

Gallup has been polling for a long time on the question of what to do in Iraq. The question offers four options: add more troops, withdraw now, withdraw in 12 months and withdraw in as many years as needed. Over the last year, the numbers on those questions have stayed remarkably stable. Only 12 percent support the idea of more troops.

But that is in line with the number who support the opposite idea of immediate withdrawal (just 15 percent). Most people appear split between withdrawal over the next year (39 percent) and withdrawal whenever (31 percent). In essence, the country remains evenly divided between staying the course and a phased withdrawal.

The challenge for the White House is to suggest that this time things will be different. But the White House is loath to suggest that if the Iraqis fail, US troops will come home. Bush's aides prefer the idea of carrots, not sticks. And they still believe -- as they have all along -- that talking about withdrawal will simply encourage the insurgents and militias to sit and wait till the Yankees go home.

Bush will emphasize other new initiatives, including economic aid, to follow the new security sweep, and a fresh push to broaden Maliki's base by pulling in more moderate Sunni and Shia leaders.

Still, much of the speech will sound familiar. The White House says that the president will explain the consequences of defeat and withdrawal: bolder terrorists, civil war, conflict throughout the region. And he will also explain what victory will look like: far messier than the clear ending to the World War II fighting in Europe and Japan.

It is indeed a fair question -- and one that isn't easy to answer. The only way to show that things will be different in Iraq is with results on the ground; all the rest is just talk. "If it comes across as more good after bad, the president won't support it, much less the American people and the Congress," the senior aide says. He adds that Bush will assure his audience that he has pushed Maliki harder than ever before in the hope of turning things around.

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tating former Baath Party members.

White House officials are keen to portray the new policy as a compromise between two extremes. On one side are the John McCains of the world, demanding big numbers of new troops for extended periods in Iraq. On the other side are the anti-dependency Democrats, demanding a phased withdrawal, or a timetable for withdrawal, to shock the Iraqis into action. (The White House dismisses the third option of withdrawal as simply a form of defeat.)

On that scale, Bush's aides hope that the new position looks measured and reasonable. "Both are correct, but you have to correct both of them," says a senior Bush aide, who declined to be named while talking about internal strategy. "Because of the situation we find ourselves in, you have to address both. On the one hand you have to make the Iraqis step up and assert themselves. But we also have a level of violence that exceeds the capacity of the govern-

ment in Iraq. After all, the White House is well aware that we've tried to escalate quickly in Iraq, to no avail. And we've also watched the Iraqis repeatedly fall short in delivering on their promises.

"The touchstone for a lot of people, as it is for the president, is 'what gives you the confidence that things will be different with the same cast of characters this time?'" says the senior Bush aide. "It's a fair question."

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Bush rolls the dice

But many Bush critics, especially among the new Democratic majority on Capitol Hill, think that throwing good people after bad policy is not going to help. "The surge is a bad idea in, and of, itself because we tried it before," says Blinken, referring to the failed Operation Forward Together which involved the movement of some 8,000 US troops into Baghdad last fall.

MICHAEL HIRSH AND JOHN BARRY

FOR a mailman's son who put himself through school working at a Campbell's soup factory in Hardscrabble Camden, N.J., there must be a special poignancy to knowing that your task over the next two years is to rescue the reputation of a blue-blooded president who's gotten himself into a bind in the Middle East.

But that's going to be William (Fox) Fallon's job as commander of CENTCOM -- the first Admiral ever to be named to head the traditionally land-oriented regional command, which covers Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan, as well as a new trouble spot: Somalia and the Horn of Africa.

Fallon's nomination is part of a flurry of major appointments coming out of the Bush administration ahead of the president's speech on a new Iraq strategy next week. The reshuffling of Bush's top command is about much more than Iraq, Pentagon insiders say. It will set the course in the entire Mideast for the remainder of Bush's presidency.

The appointment of Fallon, a former Navy aviator who commanded an air wing during the 1991 Persian Gulf War, is seen as a signal of strength to recalcitrant Iran. While Bush may not intend to go to war with that nation, but if he ever did use a military option it would have to depend largely on carrier-based air attacks commanded by Fallon.

Military planners agree that any land invasion of Iran would require at least four Army divisions. After being bogged down in Iraq for four years, the US military no longer has that capability.

The president seemed to drive that point home last month when he ordered a second carrier group to the Arabian Sea. In recent months, Iran has behaved increasingly haughtily, rejecting initiatives from Washington and Europe over its nuclear program and its alleged covert efforts to destabilize Iraq by supporting its fellow Shites there. At the same time, Fallon, who recently commanded forces in the Pacific, won't have to spend too much time strategizing about Iraq and Afghanistan, though they've been the dominant concern of CENTCOM commanders since 9/11. That's because Lt. Gen. David Petraeus is set to take over command of multi-

national forces in Iraq from Gen. George Casey, while Ryan Crocker, an Arabic-speaking expert on the Middle East, will replace Zalmay Khalilzad as ambassador in Baghdad.

Petraeus, who recently oversaw the production of the Army's new counterinsurgency manual, as well as the training of Iraqi forces, has more experience of the problems in Iraq than any other US general. Crocker was an early adviser to the US occupation in Iraq, and left the staff of Coalition Provisional Authority administrator L. Paul (Jerry) Bremer after counseling a quick handover to Iraqis.

Bremer, in an e-mail to Newsweek, said that contrary to an earlier version of this story he did not fire Crocker. "Far from firing Ryan, I tried to get State to extend his time in Baghdad because of the great value he brought (enthusiastically) to our efforts to set up the Iraqi Governing Council," Bremer wrote. "I have only the greatest respect and admiration for him."

In any case now Crocker's views are back in fashion. He has also spent the past two years as ambassador to Pakistan, where he has dealt with the cross-pollination of jihadist forces between Central Asia and the Mideast. And Nato recently took over security in Afghanistan.

For George W. Bush, all these moves -- and his expected announcement next week of a "surge" of thousands of new US troops and resources into Iraq -- may well be his final roll of the dice in getting the Mideast right. "This is, we're gonna make one real final push here. And we've got to get the policy and people in place to do it," says Antony Blinken, staff director for Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Joseph Biden.

Few people question the caliber of the new appointees. Among other moves, General Casey, who is to be replaced by Petraeus, will become Army chief of staff. And Lt. Gen. Martin Dempsey, a highly regarded ground commander charged with training Iraqi military and police, is expected to be named Fallon's deputy, according to several Pentagon sources who declined to be identified discussing personnel matters.

"Fox" Fallon is exceptionally gifted. With Dave Petraeus handling Iraq and Afghanistan, now largely under Nato, Admiral Fallon will have time to focus on Iran and the gulf, either with Harlan Ullman, a defense

expert with the Center for Naval Analyses. "If America ever has to use force to halt Iran's nuclear-weapons program, Fox Fallon, as a carrier warfare expert, has just the

president has apparently ignored advice on that score from the Iraq Study Group led by former secretary of State James Baker and ex-congressman Lee Hamilton. Edward Djerejian, one of the drafters of the Baker-Hamilton report, says he doesn't understand why.

With Iran threatening not only US interests but those of the Arab world as well, "there is a realistic possibility of engaging Syria, especially in the Arab-Israeli context and peacemaking, to drive a wedge between Syria and Iran." All of this is a lot to digest,



skill sets that the campaign would need."

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Together which involved the movement of some 8,000 US troops into Baghdad last fall. "The same old thing is going to happen," Blinken also expressed skepticism that the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki was strong, or determined, enough to meet the "benchmarks" for performance that Bush is expected to announce.

While Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice heads to the Mideast soon in an effort to reignite the all-but-extinguished Israeli-Palestinian peace process, other observers say that the Bush administration is still not doing enough on the diplomatic front, either with Iran or Syria. Indeed, the

but the 62-year-old Fallon is a quick study. He has a reputation for being tough and open-minded -- and he's certainly no warmonger. As Pacific commander, he sometimes ran afoul of China hard-liners by talking about a new cooperative relationship with Beijing.

In a conversation with reporters last September, Fallon even seemed to take a shot at neocons who portray China as the new Soviet Union. "There are institutions of our government that seem to act in a manner which has just transferred whatever we thought the Soviet Union was, and moved it into China. Which I think is incorrect," he said.

"He's got an easy way about him, a very informal style, very practical," says Jonathan Pollack of the Naval War College. "But when it's something he believes in, he's prepared to go to the mat." Before his time as CENTCOM commander is up, Fallon may just have to do that.

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