

A worthy vision

Chief Adviser's heartening speech

THE long, eagerly awaited address to the nation by Chief Advisor Fakhruddin Ahmed has placed a lot on offer before the country. We at this newspaper are heartened by the strong commitment to a free and fair election. Indeed, it is on this vexing question of how credible the electoral process would be that our politics reached an impasse necessitating the state of emergency. Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed's reassurance on this score is now there for us. Additionally, the CA's promise to examine the introduction of voter ID cards as well as transparent ballot boxes at the elections are encouraging signs of the path the country appears to be taking politically. There is too the point he made about developing an authentic voters' list prior to the elections, a point we naturally welcome.

One of the healthier aspects of the CA's speech has been the unambiguous emphasis he placed on the need to ensure human rights even as his government goes into a determined campaign against criminality all over the country. It is surely important that such rights are upheld as a way of ensuring our national commitment to the growth of a proper democratic atmosphere in Bangladesh. Fakhruddin Ahmed has clearly underlined the priorities the caretaker government has set for itself. The decriminalisation of politics the administration aims at through a weeding out of black money and muscle power from the elections is laudable. Progress in this area, particularly through disqualifying elements with a criminal background from participating in the elections, cannot but have a salutary effect on the political process. The CA's expectation that the political parties will nominate candidates for the elections on the basis of their probity is one the nation shares, together with his conviction that a depoliticised administration and a reconstituted Election Commission will strengthen the basis upon which the elections will be conducted. Crucially, the forthright position the CA has taken on the question of media freedom is highly appreciable.

Overall, we consider the address by the Chief Advisor to be an opening to the opportunities before the country at this critical phase in its history. There is, however, one noticeable gap we cannot fail to spot in the address. The public expectation of a time frame for the elections from the Chief Advisor has not been met. We do expect, though, that in the very near future the caretaker government will be in a position to provide a concrete schedule for the elections to the nation.

Good-bye Aziz

Take time in selecting the new one

JUSTICE Aziz has resigned, at last. One would have expected it to come sooner. We would have been spared the uncertainty and the troubles and tribulations of the last several months. One wonders what the other commissioners are waiting for?

We expected better from a judge. While we wish him well we are constrained to say that he had failed to act with acuity and judiciousness, qualities that good judges are endowed with naturally or acquire with time. Regrettably, it seems that he was invested with neither. He had, to say the least, displayed poor sense of responsibility and a very insensate attitude towards popular demand, as well towards his constitutional responsibility.

There are a number of issues on which he did not live up to the highest traditions of the judiciary. One needs little reminding of the way he deliberately flouted the instructions of the highest court in the country regarding the modalities of updating the voter-list. Also his holding of the post of a judge and that of CEC for a period was indefensible.

One hopes that the ex-CEC realises the great monetary loss he has caused to the nation only on account of the voter list updating. On the excuse of non-receipt of the High Court order he unethically continued with his own way of updating the list, costing the exchequer crores of taka as a result. We feel that Justice Aziz ought to be held to account for the loss for the sake of setting good example so that no future CEC can tinker with the dignity of the position of the CEC.


Now that Justice Aziz has decided to leave the post of CEC, it should pave the way for the caretaker government to initiate the much-awaited recasting of the election commission. This is also the opportunity to invest the commission with full autonomy so that it can perform its tasks without any let or hindrance, particularly from the political quarters.

In selecting the new CEC please take your time and closely examine the quality and credentials of the would be incumbent before inducting him in the post. Please, don't rush.

Resurgence of religious extremism

BY THE NUMBERS

There are some reasons for the nation to be worried about the resurgence of religious extremism. Most of the JMB leaders, including the two kingpins, were arrested and put into jail. But it has had no effects, as numerous reports reveal that these groups are increasing in strength and becoming a formidable menace. Recent developments belie the government's assertion that extremist outfits have been nipped in the bud. Their resurgence must be taken seriously.



ANM NURUL HAQUE

THE elite anti-crime force, Rab, busted several militant hideouts in Narayanganj on January 7, and seized 80 hand grenades, a huge quantity of explosives and locally made iron cases to be used for making grenades. The Rab also arrested six militants of banned Jammatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) who possessed the bomb-making materials.

The intelligence wing of the Rab arrested two members of JMB on January 10 from a house at Badda in the city, and recovered a huge amount of explosives. Police nabbed two persons with a huge amount of arms, ammunition and detonators, from a bus in Tangail on December 29. Following their confessional statement, the Rab members seized a huge quantity of bomb-making materials from Dhaka, Gazipur and Narayanganj on December 30.

Rab members, on January 18, seized a huge cache of bomb-making materials from a JMB den in Savar. But none could be arrested, as four JMB activists

escaped sensing the presence of the law enforcers. The raid was conducted following the information extracted from a JMB commander who was arrested from Narayanganj a few days back.

The recent incidents of arrest of some JMB activists from different parts of the country, and seizure of huge quantity of grenade and bomb-making materials from their possession clearly reveals that the banned Islamist outfit has now resumed its activities. Maybe they retained their arms and explosives, or have got new supplies from their hidden sources.

The youngsters arrested by the Rab recently are reported to have been enrolled as new members of the JMB. It seems that many such members have been enrolled and trained by the JMB commanders, and its units have been set up in different districts to restart their operation. They are clearly preparing to bring a revolutionary change in the country's political and economic system, using grenades and bombs.

The JMB is the banned

Islamist militants group which blasted bombs in 63 district towns in the country, simultaneously, on August 17, 2005, and also killed some people including two district judges. The recent development clearly reflects the resurgence of the JMB, despite actions taken last year and punishment awarded to its leaders by the court. It is really regrettable that the threat from the Islamist militants is emerging once again because the BNP-led alliance govern-ment failed to deal squarely with the extremist outfits.

According to the media reports, more than two dozen Islamist groups are now active in Bangladesh, pursuing the same mission as the banned JMB, to establish Islamic rule in the country.

The smaller groups, who went underground in the face of the intense anti-militancy drive by the joint forces, are now regrouping under a new banner and planning to carry on JMB mission. These groups are Jamaat-e-AI-Turat, Jamaat-e-lahiya Trust, Hizbut Tawhid, Jamaatul Falaiya, Tawhidi

Janata, Biswa Islamic Front, Jamaat-as-Shahdat, Shahdat-e-Nabuwat, Al-Khidmat, Jayasi Mohammad, Laskar-e-Jangi, Arakan Rohingya Force, Loskar-e-Taiba and Islamic Solidarity Front.

Surprisingly, the government was unaware about the activities of these militant outfits including Harkat-ul-Jihad, Jagrata Muslim Janata and Al-Hikma, who were banned for their anti-state activities. Harkat-ul-Jihad, that comprises Afghan war veterans, held a rally at Baitul Mukarram mosque on August 18 under the new banner of Sachetan Islami Janata (conscious Islamist people).

According to home ministry records a total number of 698 people have been arrested so far in connection with 154 cases on the blasts of August 17, 2005, and 87 cases for the blasts that took place later. The police submitted charge sheets in 183 cases, and 56 are still under investigation. The trial of 18 cases has also been completed.

Of the charged, the JMB king-pin Shaikh Abdur Rahman is accused in 70 cases, Sidduqu

Islam "Bangla Bhai" in 67, and operation commander Ataur Rahman Sunny in 62 cases. Thirty-two militants including Abdur Rahman, Bangla Bhai and Sunny have been sentenced to death. The verdict is yet to be carried out.

It is pertinent to call into question the real success of the BNP-led alliance government to root out the extremist outfits, as the threat from the extremists has not yet disappeared. The government did a lot of things for arresting the top JMB leaders, but hardly did anything of substance to trace the financiers and patrons who have been pulling the strings from behind the scene.

During interrogation by the Task Force Intelligence (TFI) the JMB chief Abdur Rahman admitted that his militant outfit had been fuelled through funding both from home and abroad. The government listed 25 local JMB financiers, including some high-profile politicians, who were put under surveillance. Some NGOs have also been allegedly supplying funds to militants.

The home ministry, on March 16, formed a three-member probe committee to investigate into the source of funds of the JMB. But the BNP-led alliance government was quite silent over the issue, which is seriously blurring its sincerity in tracing out the patrons and the financiers.

The 8th parliament passed as many as 185 laws during its full tenure, including some laws

against the interest of the people. But it did not pass the much-anticipated Anti-terrorism Act to tackle religious extremism in the country.

The Anti-terrorism Act, prepared in the style of Anti-terrorism Act of the US and UK, was approved by the cabinet on January 6. After the terror attacks on Twin-Towers, the US government enacted the Patriot Act, and following the London blasts the UK government enacted the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2005 with a view to punishing the terrorists.

The BNP-led alliance government has given official recognition to the certificate of qaomi madrasas, ignoring intelligence reports that hundreds of such madrasas are being used to recruit and train Islamist militants.


AL has signed an accord with Islamist fundamentalists, ignoring mass protest. The reason is quite simple. Their political opportunism fell prey to religious extremism.

There are some reasons for the nation to be worried about the resurgence of religious extremism. Most of the JMB leaders, including the two kingpins, were arrested and put into jail. But it has had no effects, as numerous reports reveal that these groups are increasing in strength and becoming a formidable menace.

Recent developments belie the government's assertion that extremist outfits have been nipped in the bud. Their resurgence must be taken seriously.

Congress floundering for strategy

So far, the Congress has basically two achievements to its credit: National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and Right to Information Act. It owes these to progressive intellectuals and civil society organisations. Unless it improves on this performance, it cannot "go it alone" in the next Lok Sabha election and score.



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

THE Hindutva parivar's opponents sometimes behave as if they were bent on snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. Take the municipal corporation elections in Maharashtra, due on February 1. The Congress-Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) alliance stood an excellent chance of winning them. Its main adversary, the Shiv Sena-Bharatiya Janata Party coalition, is in poor shape after Mr Raj Thackeray split the Sena and Pramod Mahajan was killed by his brother. Together, the Congress-NCP could deliver the Sena-BJP the pasting of a lifetime. But that's not likely to happen.

Barring Akola, the two parties won't be allies in the 10 cities due for elections. They might also not end their long vanavas from the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation which presides over

the destiny of 13 million people, runs activities ranging from education to transport to drainage, has a budget of Rs 12,500 crores, and generates Rs 58,000 crores in taxes.

The Congress-NCP failed to seal an alliance because of internal turf wars, as well as mutual rivalry. This rivalry is being played out primarily between the Congress's Narayan Rane and the NCP's Chhagan Bhujbal -- both former Shiv Sainiks. In Mumbai, the alliance talks collapsed because the NCP demanded 70 tickets, five times higher than the number of its members in the 227-seat corporation. The Congress has increased its lead over the NCP in the Maharashtra Assembly and put it on the defensive. Maharashtra is the NCP's sole political base.

Many Congressmen question the rationale of the NCP's existence as a separate party. NCP chief, Sharad Pawar, quit the Congress because he questioned Ms Sonia Gandhi's leadership but, later, implicitly accepted it by joining a Congress-led govern-

ment.

However, political dynamics aren't determined by such logic alone. At work also is the social coalition the NCP represents, based on affluent farmers in Western Maharashtra who are rooted in sugar-cane and grape cultivation.

Mr Pawar prefers to be a big fish in a small pond (NCP), rather than a small fish in a big pond (Congress). The Congress doesn't fully trust Mr Pawar. In 1978, he defected from it and formed a hostile government. Besides, some Congressmen suspect that he's secretly in league with Mr Raj Thackeray. Whatever the truth, the Congress-NCP's failure to unite will probably help the Sena-BJP just when they seemed to be going into a tailspin.

In Punjab, and Uttarakhand too, the Congress is riven by factionalism. The anti-incumbency factor is heavy here because of a grim agrarian crisis and high unemployment. The BJP may be over-optimistic in claiming that it will win in Uttarakhand "convincingly on its own." But it

could certainly put up a fight if it can contain its internal rivalry.

In Manipur, there's widespread disgust with the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act imposed by the Centre, and its handling of the Naga problem, which directly affects the state's hill districts.

Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state -- and the world's sixth most populous entity -- will see a battle royal. The Congress is a dwarf here compared to Ms Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party and Mr Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party. UP politics has been stirred with Mr Ajit Singh's Rashtriya Lok Dal quitting Mr Yadav's ministry, and the Congress withdrawing support to it.

Mr Yadav, who commands a majority thanks to numerous defections, is likely to preserve his government. But his opponents are worried that he won't play fair during the elections. Recent opinion polls suggest a steep decline in the SP's seat tally -- to under 100 from the present 152 in the 403-strong Assembly. Mr Yadav's support among Muslims and non-Yadav OBCs

(Other Backward Classes) is eroding.

Many Muslims are disillusioned because Mr Yadav didn't issue a fresh notification in the Babri Masjid case against Mr L.K. Advani. He also participated in a condolence meeting for RSS ideologue Bhanu Pratap Shukla, and offered lavish hospitality to BJP leaders during their recent Lucknow national council. Mr Yadav is trying to signal that he is still with the "secular agenda" by calling on the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board chairman.

Ms Mayawati has fully consolidated her Dalit base and is now aggressively courting Brahmins and Vaishyas. The BSP didn't participate in recent elections to urban bodies. In many cases its cadres voted for the BJP to defeat the SP. That artificially bloated the BJP's small gains. But the results certainly boosted BJP cadres' morale after a long period of decline and demoralisation.

The BJP can, at best, compete for the number three position in UP. Its base is the urban upper-caste Hindu. It lacks a strategy to widen its appeal. Its temple agenda finds few backers. It would be a miracle if the party improves significantly over its 2002 Assembly performance (20 percent of the total vote, and 88 seats).

The Congress's prospects have been looking up since the 2004 Lok Sabha elections and Mr Rahul Gandhi's active participation in party affairs. The Congress wants each of its nine MPs from UP to guarantee the victory of four Assembly candidates. But that will give the Congress less than a tenth of the Assembly seats -- just enough to enter a coalition government as a minor partner.


If the Congress wants to be a big player, it must develop clarity about two things. What social groupings or coalition does it represent, especially in polarised states like UP and Bihar? And what is the policy content of its election appeal? Can it expand its base with it?

So far, the Congress has basically two achievements to its credit: National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and Right to Information Act. It owes these to progressive intellectuals and civil society organisations. Unless it improves on this performance, it cannot "go it alone" in the next Lok Sabha election and score.

Such improvement won't happen spontaneously. It will need vision, moral clarity and a commitment to left-of-centre policies. But it's not clear if the Congress leadership can summon up the will to do this.

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Caretaker government: Which way to move?



ABDUL BAYES

THE newly formed caretaker government (CTG) headed by Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed, as of now, seems to be sailing well in rough weather. But to be conclusive on the output to be delivered by the CTG, we shall have to wait for a few more months.

The main task for the CTG is to create an environment for a free, fair, neutral and credible election -- an expectation that the nation has had over the years, and for which a lot of lives have been lost and properties damaged.

BENEATH THE SURFACE

By and large, the current CTG is expected to gift the nation with a credible election within the shortest possible time. In the same way, it should also carry out some activities that are socially desirable, but were put on the sideline due to political pressure. Nearly two weeks have passed since the current CTG assumed responsibility, and it is now time for it to act as a tough government. As a tree is known by the fruit it bears, so will the CTG be remembered by the people through its actions to follow.

The general election of January 22, 2007, had to be cancelled because of the devastation. However, some of us seem to overlook the issue of economic losses and hardships of the common people.

Despite the losses in terms of economic growth due to mass movements, the gains should not be forgotten. That is, the Bangladeshis have become more conscious about their freedom -- freedom to choose representatives fairly and freely -- and all the sacrifices were made to ensure that freedom.

Freedom is another name of

development. All our achievements -- from the freedom movement to removal of autocrats -- came through bloodshed and street processions, and at the cost of economic hardship.

We are eagerly waiting to see the CTG immediately take the necessary steps to rectify the voter list, overhaul the EC, and bring into force administrative changes to ensure a level playing field for all parties.

Our assumption is that all these activities should not take more than 90 days from the day the current CTG entered into office. Of course, a few more

days could be counted in comfort, provided the CTG deems it fit. But the bottom line should be an election before June 2007.

The CTG chief needs to present a road map to the nation about its plans and actions, immediately. In the following paragraphs, we shall try to suggest a few more steps beyond the boundaries of activities hovering around holding a credible election because, in addition to holding a free and fair election, the CTG also has to perform the daily work of the government.

One of the prime tasks of the

current CTG would be to stop all recruitments and promotions in government or semi-government institutions from the day the past political government handed over power to the CTG.

That means, from the day Dr Iajuddin assumed the position of the chief of CTG. As the heads of the most of institutions were politically appointed, quite obviously, the recruitments and promotions that have been taking place since then were driven more by politics than by merit. Public universities, particularly, are a case in this point.

A scanning of newspaper reports shows how hurriedly recruitments and promotions have been undertaken with political considerations. In many cases, rules were flouted and interviews were held at quick notice.

Recruitments and promotions are banned once a new government takes over, for taking stock of things. Furthermore, Rajshahi and Jahangirnagar

universities, to be specific, recruited a number of teachers for departments for which there was no approval from the UGC. It would, therefore, be in the fitness of things if the current CTG makes all such appointments null and void.

The second task would be to carry out a thorough investigation of the activities of the business syndicate that allegedly manipulated market prices to cause hardship to common people. The erstwhile political government identified the role of the syndicates but, possibly because of political pressure, nothing could be done.

But, since the CTG is non-partisan, we expect that exemplary action will be taken against the business syndicates. The government should never interfere in the play of market forces, but should duly monitor the happenings in the market. A good market mechanism calls for a good government to govern.

The third action should relate

to releasing of government properties from illegal occupation. We appreciate that the government has already started this.

Usually, under political patronage from a political government, hoodlums resort to grabbing government land. There are many instances to this effect, and the CTG should recover all the grabbed land.

Newspaper reports tell us that as many as 30 houses were disposed off by the RAJUK, at much below the market price, to political supporters of the erstwhile government, thus causing huge losses to the exchequer. The CTG could earn the people's support by seriously investigating the matter, and bringing back the hijacked properties.

Fourthly, as was judiciously done to separate the judiciary from the executive, the CTG should take necessary steps to provide autonomy to government owned radio and TV -- an action that had been promised by political parties, but not

implemented.

Finally, serious drives should be started to arrest terrorists, black-money holders, and corrupt persons who amassed a huge amount of wealth during the last few years, and necessary steps should be taken to bring them to book.

By and large, the current CTG is expected to gift the nation with a credible election within the shortest possible time. In the same way, it should also carry out some activities that are socially desirable, but were put on the sideline due to political pressure.

Nearly two weeks have passed since the current CTG assumed responsibility, and it is now time for it to act as a tough government. As a tree is known by the fruit it bears, so will the CTG be remembered by the people through its actions to follow.

Abdul Bayes is "Professor" of Economics at Jahangirnagar University