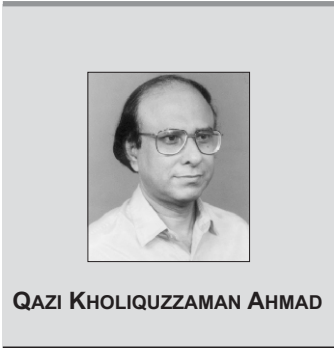


# Between despair and hope



QAZI KHOLIQUEZZAMAN AHMAD

A pall of despair set in over the nation when, on October 29, 2006, President Iajuddin Ahmed took over as the chief adviser (CA) of the non-party caretaker government. He couldn't break out of his party adherence and dictates. It became increasingly obvious, the way he started to manage the electoral process, that he was promoting the interest of a particular alliance without regard to national interests and the people's aspirations.

The overhanging cloud kept thickening, with the nation plunging into violent political confrontations. His prime responsibility as the CA was to create the necessary environment for free, fair, and peaceful parliamentary elections. But he failed to take action to remove the stumbling blocks, and the country kept sliding towards an ever-deeper political crisis, with violent street clashes and destruction of lives and property.

BEHIND THE FACADE

In concluding this piece, let me make the following overall comment on the CA's address. It is good to be ambitious, but it is better to be realistic. It is absolutely necessary that bold steps be taken to resolve all the issues on the critical path for the forthcoming parliamentary elections to be free, fair, and peaceful.

At last, however, hope dawned. On January 11, the president declared nation-wide emergency and resigned from the post of CA, admitting that he himself was highly controversial as the CA. He also recognized all the other key problems standing in the way of a free, fair, and peaceful election. They were being voiced by many political parties, including the grand alliance, as well as by freethinking people from various walks of life.

The problems lay in the Election Commission (EC) itself, and in the faulty voter list, the administration, and even the judiciary, he admitted. He also recognized corruption to be a major problem, and appreciated the demands for transparent ballot box and voter ID cards.

While declaring emergency, he also said that, under the prevailing unfavourable conditions, acceptable parliamentary elections could not be held within the stipulated 90 days. This meant that the elections, which were scheduled for January 22, were

automatically postponed. These elections have since been cancelled.

A day after resigning as the CA, on January 12, the president appointed Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed as the new CA of the non-party caretaker government. The appointment of ten advisers followed.

Some of the advisers have been quick, following their appointment, in making comments and giving interviews to the press regarding such matters as the need for the reconstituting the EC, preparing a credible voter list, ridding the administration of partisanship, improving law and order situation, curbing the high and rising prices of consumer essentials, and improving electricity supply and distribution systems.

But the new CA refrained from making any such statement until January 21, nine days after his appointment. On this day, surely after stock-taking and evaluating the prevailing situation, he finally spoke to the nation.

The scene set by his predecessor's

speech, which portrayed a major attitudinal shift in favour of sanity, has clearly been built upon. In certain respects the new CA, as would be expected, has gone further.

One of the praiseworthy actions that have already been taken by the present caretaker government is that the separation of judiciary from the executive is in the process of implementation.

It was kept hanging by successive governments for many years, invoking one excuse or another. The CA has pledged to reconstitute the EC along non-partisan lines, prepare a flawless voter list, and take steps to make the country's civil administration non-party and neutral, with a view to create a level playing field for all political parties to participate in the forthcoming parliamentary elections.

Other actions promised include curbing corruption by properly activating the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) and taking other necessary measures, controlling the influence of black money and mus-

cles on the forthcoming parliamentary elections, ensuring that prospective candidates submit their wealth and eligibility statements, and examining the veracity of those statements for necessary action. They include controlling the price hike in respect of consumer essentials, examining the introduction of voter ID cards and transparent ballot boxes, and taking steps to improve the power supply situation. He has called upon the political parties to nominate honest and efficient candidates. In the wake of these commitments of the CA, hope is now resurgent.

The CA has said that the caretaker government will take bold steps to fulfill the promises made, and enable the forthcoming parliamentary elections to take place within the shortest possible time. This is all very good. But, the phrase "shortest possible time" is subject to interpretation and *may create confusion*. It may perhaps be used while a plan of action is in the works, but soon enough a firm date for the elections must be announced. Otherwise, speculations about what might or might not happen may start emerging and circulating, eventually causing unease and commotion to set in. Along delay in holding elections may be even more problematic. Let us briefly examine the main tasks to be undertaken by the caretaker government, as set by the CA.

Let us first consider the following identified tasks: curbing corruption,

controlling price hike, improving power sector services, and preparing and issuing voter ID cards. These issues cannot be resolved within a few months, even if determined and bold actions are taken. However, towards resolving these issues, the caretaker government should do all it can to make progress, and set the ball rolling for the next elected government to be pressured to build on.

Specifically, regarding curbing corruption and price hike, an example can surely be set by catching some top-most corrupt people, black-marketeers, and big market manipulators, and bringing them to justice.

Pressure must also be put on the political parties for nominating honest and able candidates by sticking to the position already taken that candidates must submit their wealth and eligibility statements, which will be examined for veracity, and that necessary action will follow on the basis of the findings. But, the forthcoming parliamentary elections should not be made conditional upon overcoming all these problems.

The other tasks identified are, in fact, the stumbling blocks on the critical path, which must be removed for the forthcoming parliamentary elections to be free, fair, and peaceful. These are the reconstitution of the EC, a credible voter list, and a neutral electoral process (ie one must be able to vote without being harassed or intimidated by any

quarter, each vote must be counted for the candidate for whom it is cast, and the results are published according to the votes so received by different candidates).

It should not take long to accomplish these tasks. It will be possible, I should think, to introduce transparent ballot boxes within the time required to resolve the issues on the critical path. If feasible within this timeframe, it will be very good to introduce voter ID cards as well. But if longer time is needed, elections should not be held back for introducing voter ID cards, as this is not absolutely critical for holding credible elections.

Regarding the reconstitution of the EC, Justice MA Aziz has finally, though belatedly, decided to spare the nation further uncertainties, complications, and confrontations, and resigned as the chief election commissioner (CEC). One hopes that the other election commissioners will follow suit, enabling a proper reconstitution of the EC. About MA Aziz, let me make the following comment. We were year-mates in the University of Dhaka, he in history and I in economics.

I would say that we were friends, and I congratulated him on his appointment as the CEC. But when I judged that he was on the wrong path, jeopardizing the interests of the nation and the people, I called for his resignation as early as May 13, 2006, while addressing the Bangladesh Young Economists Association

(BYEA). The speech was published soon after. Now that he has finally understood his position and quit, I congratulate him once again, this time for a thoughtful decision taken by him in view of the prevailing circumstances.

In concluding this piece, let me make the following overall comment on the CA's address. It is good to be ambitious, but it is better to be realistic. It is absolutely necessary that bold steps be taken to resolve all the issues on the critical path for the forthcoming parliamentary elections to be free, fair, and peaceful.

Also, bold and purposeful steps need to be taken to address other identified major problems, which will set examples and show definitive ways forward. But the time the caretaker government should allow itself before the elections are held, I would argue, has to be based on the critical path argument offered above.

One hopes that the caretaker government will soon remove the uncertainty about the electoral timeframe, and that the timeframe will be based on the need to resolve the issues on the critical path only. Let all concerned rise to the occasion and make sure that the resurgent hope is fulfilled, and not dashed.

Dr Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad is President, Bangladesh Economic Association (BEA) and Chairman, Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad (BUP).

# Iraq Study Group: The forgotten men

If that sounds like cold comfort, there's always the report's financial success to savor. Publisher Vintage Books says 280,000 copies have already been shipped to stores, not bad for a policy manual. No, Baker et al. don't get a windfall. After commission expenses are paid, a portion of the money goes to the National Military Family Association, which supports the spouses and children of soldiers in service. With more troops heading to Iraq, it's money well spent.

DAN EPHRON

FOR Leon Panetta, the gesture of respect failed to disguise the rebuff. Two hours before George W. Bush announced plans to send more troops to Iraq earlier this month, the president had his national-security adviser, Stephen Hadley, brief members of the Iraq Study Group by phone on the "surge" plan. Nine of the bipartisan panel's 10 members were on the line, including co-chairs James Baker and Lee Hamilton.

Panetta, one of the Democrats on the commission and President Bill Clinton's former chief of staff, says Hadley began by listing those recommendations Bush had chosen to incorporate into his plan.

Most were minor, according to Panetta. "I interrupted him and said that while we made 79 recommendations, three were the heart and soul of the report," Panetta told NEWSWEEK, citing the draw-down of US troops by next year, the need to penalize the Iraqi government if benchmarks were not met and the call for diplomacy with Iran and Syria.

Hadley's response -- the three were not part of the Bush plan -- left Panetta feeling hoodwinked. "Mainly I'm offended by the way they created the impression they



gave it consideration but really didn't." (A National Security Council official confirmed the exchange.)

A month ago, members of the graybeard Iraq Study Group were rock stars in Washington. Their report appeared to herald a return to pragmatism in Iraq, and the published version whizzed to the top of The New York Times best-seller list (fifth, as of last week, in the nonfiction paperback category).

Now Hamilton, Baker and the rest are back running academic institutes or consulting firms, gone and maybe forgotten.



Or are they? Baker and Hamilton are returning to Congress this month to testify before key committees and argue for a wider diplomatic push in the Middle East. "I think you may be seeing our coming out more publicly," says Edward Djerejian, Baker's top adviser. (His boss is known to think that while the troop surge can be squared with the panel's recommendations, Bush's refusal to engage Iran and especially Syria diplomatically is the real mistake.)

With opponents on both sides of the aisle predicting that Bush's surge will fail, some Capitol Hill insiders are talking about the ISG

report as a kind of Plan B, to be revisited a few months down the road.

"Even if it's not the star people thought it would become, the north star, it's still there, and a lot of what's in it will probably happen anyway," says a senior Democratic staffer in the Senate who did not have his boss's permission to speak on record.

If other panelists are disappointed, they're not letting on. Democrat Vernon Jordan says he knew from the start Bush would pick and choose: "I'm not walking around wounded." Ditto Alan Simpson, the Republican former senator from Wyoming: "We're all grown-up boys and girls. We didn't stick our thumbs in our mouths and pout."

Edwin Meese, the Republican who served as Ronald Reagan's attorney general, thought Bush actually incorporated most of the panel's recommendations. And Hamilton says the panel "changed the debate" on Iraq, affecting the language Bush used in his speech.

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# Muslims "get" globalisation, but does it get them?

For Muslim antagonism toward "free" global exchange to decline in a broader fashion, the exchange needs to be truly bi-directional. There must be genuine opportunity in this global marketplace for ideas and ideologies, not merely for the stifling effects of oligopolies and special-interests.

MEHMOOD KAZMI

THE real impact of globalisation on Muslim-Western relations has been mixed but, as the adage reminds us, "bad news travels faster." Ironically, the speed advantage of globalisation's negative press can be attributed primarily to globalisation itself.

Empirically, it seems credible that income levels and life-expectancy in Muslim-majority countries have improved in the last half-century, as have media openness and information distribution. Yet, world events and discourse strongly suggest that Muslims' net impressions of globalisation actually add up to a distinctly negative bias, which seems to have the western world befuddled.

From the US point of view, this comes across as apparent ingratitude on the part of these developing countries that, showered with aid and investment, seem to want to bite the hand that feeds them.

Two maxims seem critical for bridging the Muslim-Western understanding gap on the impact of globalisation: "perception is reality" and "denying reality does not help perception." In the eyes of many in predominantly-Muslim countries, the ambitions of proponents of free financial, trade and information flows are seen through two distorting lenses: suspicion and insecurity.

The suspicion is the residual effect of resource exploitation under colonialism. The second view, uniquely Muslim-Western, stems from insecurity over whether Islamic civilisation will ever reassert itself after its prolonged period of stagnation. It is particularly an issue of the Muslim world because, unlike other civilisations, only Islam had a cultural dominance over the west ever.

Numerous accounts exist of Islam's golden-era eclipsing Europe's dark ages, and of reformation -- and renaissance -- thinking being spurred by exposure to the scientific curiosity of Muslims. In contrast, great civilisations -- such as the Aztec, Chinese or Indian -- never held any part of Europe in a sphere of influence, let alone within their borders. This has perhaps saved them, ironically, from the obsession with "re"-assertion.

To put things in context, the Middle-East today may be compared socially to middle-America in the 1950s. At that time, a fully-clothed Elvis singing obscenity-free lyrics was banned from TV talk-shows because of his gyrating hips.

What intentions do we expect Muslims to project on the west if "free media" means that the most explicit pop videos of the day will be beamed into their living rooms and watched by their innocent children? Imagine how an America, suspicious of broadcast-Elvis, would have railed at satellite-Britney or at

Paris Hilton.

In addition, how does one explain the fact that on the same signal, only a click away, the national news has no ability to question the ruling monarch or autocrat? The former point, "MTV for Muslim masses," highlights the problem of perception: this becomes the reality to which societies will react. The latter point, "Yes to pop-music, No to political accountability," underscores the frustrating reality that we cannot deny without widening the chasm of misunderstanding.

The hope for the future may lie first in a dose of forgetfulness, if not forgiveness and repentance. As a colonial-era generation has passed, and the post-colonial one is aging, a new wave of young people is coming up in both Muslim-majority countries and the west. On the one hand, information availability and a growing diversity in western societies have nudged even privileged youth in the United States and Europe to view developing countries more as people rather than as economic resources, albeit sometimes with an eye to future consumer markets.

At the same time, there are burgeoning numbers of young people throughout Muslim-dominated countries who have learned to appreciate western ideals of intellectual freedom and self-determination, despite certain unfortunate realities of politics and

war, though their numbers remain small.

For Muslim antagonism toward "free" global exchange to decline in a broader fashion, the exchange needs to be truly bi-directional. There must be genuine opportunity in this global marketplace for ideas and ideologies, not merely for the stifling effects of oligopolies and special-interests.

While globalisation of media has created forums for "moderate" voices from the east and the west to come together, even in this sector there is risk of further misunderstanding. With BBC, CNN and Fox News being nearly ubiquitous in the Middle-East, how can proponents of globalisation justify the fact that no US cable or satellite distributor will carry the English-language Al-Jazeera, a network run by nothing more threatening than a cadre of BBC vets and their peers from other western stations?

As for other developing countries, globalisation becomes palatable when the economic expansion of multinational corporations comes with the extension of western notions of labour, consumer and environmental protection. But, in Muslim-majority countries in particular, the backlash to globalisation needs to also be diffused by prioritising the additional burdens of cultural sensitivity and real political inequity.

Mehmood Kazmi is an international business and investment consultant.

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# Let there be a time frame

Our donor agencies and development partners, who matter a lot in the making of our destiny, whether we like it or not, also seem to be in favour of an early election. The dilemma, if I may say so, for Dr Ahmed is that people see his government as a savior of the country's derailed democracy and thinks that with the support he has from home and abroad, he should be able to rectify the inherent defects in our electoral process and offer the nation a free, fair and credible election.

HUSAIN IMAM

THE grand alliance headed by Awami League chief, Sheikh Hasina, wanted President Iajuddin Ahmed to cancel the January 22 election, resign from the post of CA, appoint a neutral and non-political person as chief of the caretaker government, reconstitute the Election Commission, depoliticize the administration, prepare a flawless voter list and then announce a fresh election schedule.

The reason behind this was

to hold the election in a free, fair and credible manner, and in a congenial atmosphere where all the major political parties could play their part in a level playing field under a neutral umpire.

The 4-party coalition headed by BNP chairperson, Khleda Zia, had different ideas. They wanted the election to be held at any cost by January 22, even if that meant a one-sided election participated by none other than their own coalition partners, amidst violent confrontation and loss of life and property.

The reason is anybody's guess. However, "man proposes, God disposes" goes the saying.

The January 22 election has been cancelled. The president has declared emergency, resigned from the post of CA and appointed Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed, former governor of Bangladesh Bank, as the new chief of the caretaker government.

Justice MA Aziz has also resigned, and the people now are eagerly waiting to see his other colleagues in the EC follow suit, paving the way for reconstitution of the Election

Commission and holding of a free, fair and credible election acceptable to all.

Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed in his maiden address, on January 21, as chief adviser to the caretaker government, has rightly identified the malaise centering the national election 2007 that led to cancellation of the January 22 election, and the declaration of emergency.

He has assured the nation in unambiguous term that the main objective of his government is to ensure a free, fair and credible election and hand over power to a truly representative elected government in the shortest possible time.

And to that end his government is determined to do everything possible -- reconstitution of election commission, preparation of a flawless voter list- if possible voter ID card, reform of electoral process, neutralization of administration and improvement of the law and

order situation, to name the most important ones -- keeping in mind the demands of the political parties, the civil society, more importantly the aspirations of the general public.

Interestingly, going one step further, the chief adviser has indicated his intention to keep black money and musclemen at bay from the electoral process and address the all-pervasive corruption that has engulfed the whole nation like a giant octopus. We welcome his move and wish him all the success.

May I, however, most humbly add here a note of caution for Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed.

Either because of overwhelming support and counsel that he is likely to receive from his well wishers, many of whom may well be self seekers in disguise, or being inspired by the present mood of the people, he may be tempted to do too many good things in too short a time and that may prove coun-

ter-productive.

The political parties in general have welcomed the policy speech of the chief adviser. Awami League claims that the chief adviser's address to the nation is a testimony to the justification of their demands for cancellation of January 22 election and announcement of a fresh election schedule after carrying out necessary reforms.

They haven't however, together with the 4-party alliance, failed to point out the missing link, ie the time frame within which Dr Ahmed wants to hold the election. Both the alliances want that the election be held better earlier than later.

While Awami League has not yet spelled out any specific time frame, BNP wants the election to be held within 90 days.

Our donor agencies and development partners, who matter a lot in the making of our destiny, whether we like it or not, also seem to be in favour of

an early election.

The dilemma, if I may say so, for Dr Ahmed is that people see his government as a savior of the country's derailed democracy and thinks that with the support he has from home and abroad, he should be able to rectify the inherent defects in our electoral process and offer the nation a free, fair and credible election.

The question is, how soon can he do this? Any attempt to prolong the rule of the caretaker government, with however a good intention it may be, is likely to raise doubts about the sincerity of this government and jeopardize its credibility.

It is important that Dr Ahmed quickly prioritizes his agenda, set a time frame and let it be known to the public. Needless to mention that reconstitution of the election commission and the preparation of a flawless voter list should be his top priority.

We note with concern that, taking advantage of the situation, some vested quarters, even some members of our civil society with the help of a section of our electronic and print media are out there with a special agenda to tarnish the image of our politicians, and divert the attention of our people from the democratic process.

They are trying to give us an impression that our politicians are solely and fully responsible for the abysmal situation we are in, conveniently suppressing the fact that this country has been under the military or quasi-military rule, aided and supported by a group of opportunist people coming from civil and military bureaucracy, for more than half the total period of its independence.

Husain Imam is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.