

Some vital recommendations

Caretaker government needs to take them up

It is widely acknowledged that the prevailing state of emergency provides a window of opportunity for carrying out some fundamental reforms before we can think of holding free, fair and impartial elections in the country. A roundtable held on Saturday by The Daily Star on Challenges before the Caretaker Government threw up some useful ideas about how we prepare the grounds for worthwhile national elections sooner than later. The eminent citizens who took part in the discussion virtually gave a blueprint of reform to the caretaker government which can now pick out some of their major recommendations and draw up a road map to present the country with a credible election.

The first priority ought to be the reconstitution of the Election Commission with men of integrity and proven competence so that the EC is strong enough to be tough on the violators of electoral rules. The EC must have a secretariat independent of any executive control whatsoever. Secondly, a properly reconstituted non-partisan EC should then move to prepare an authentic voters' list with the assistance of the local body representatives and political party units at the grassroots. To issue ID cards to voters would require creation of a data base which shouldn't be an insurmountable task.

To stop the use of black money in elections, ACC, NBR and the EC need to work in concert. The political parties turn to black money holders and loan defaulters to finance costly election campaigns. Candidates overshoot the campaign expenditure ceiling by huge margins with impunity. The rule for declaration of assets by the candidates is not strictly applied. State financing of political parties came up for discussion as also the matter of bringing the political parties under some legal framework through registration with the EC.

Adjudication of electoral disputes is one of the weakest spots in the system requiring speedy dispensation of justice. In this context, the suggestion aired in the roundtable that the number of High Court benches be raised to deal with election disputes finds a responsive chord in us.

The emphasis is on doable agenda within a limited time period at the disposal of the caretaker government, so it is worthwhile to go about them in earnest.

Police brutality at Bogra

Must not happen again

THE quick departmental action taken against police officers and constables of Bogra Sadar Police Station who had tortured a young man on charge of theft has been appreciated by all quarters. We commend the government. The graphic representation of the policemen torturing the young man in a medieval manner had sent shivers of indignation through the readers of newspapers. It is however commonly believed that perhaps because of that particular photograph we came to know about the excesses done in one police station and we have reasons to believe that many such torture incidents perpetrated by the police never get reported.

Now that prompt action has been taken against the accused officials and constables, the authorities concerned should bring them before the law of the land so that they are given exemplary punishment after trial. Such punishment would only bring to the fore the vital issue of respecting the law and establishing the dictum that no one is above the law. This needs to be mentioned that many good works of the police get diluted because of highhandedness of some members.

Allegations of torture on suspects against the members of the police force filter in from various sources and a lot has been written in the media urging the authorities to address the situation. We strongly feel that the entire police department needs to be put through a massive reform exercise to bring it up to the level of a modern force that would be mentally equipped to deal with a situation with skill rather than brute force.

Policemen have to be sensitised about human rights and the consequences of violating such basic rights of the citizens. Accountability is the call of the day.

Et tu, advisers!?



SHAHNOOR WAHID

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

There is wide consensus among the masses that it is now or never. That is, the caretaker government will have to act now, since they are not likely to get a second chance to do what the people want them to do in all sincerity -- launch a colossal purging operation. The onus now rests on them to put the country in reverse gear to get away from the edge of the precipice and change the course; to give democracy a chance and rescue politics from the unholy grip of black money. Lastly, they will have to pave the way for a free, fair and credible election after clearing the debris of the last fifteen years.

honest chief adviser and some supposedly neutral and honest advisers coming from various professions.

So far there have been three caretaker governments, but no charge of "corruption done while in office" was leveled against any member of the previous two governments.

But, this time, to our profound mental anguish, we are hearing stories of corruption, misappropriation and misdemeanour raised against more than one member of the immediate past, short-lived caretaker government that was so pathetically led by the wobbly chief adviser Lajuddin Ahmed.

What can we say! How forcefully can we express our shock and disgust! What more to discover how deep our moral bankruptcy has reached!

There is more to say about the selection of the advisers of a caretaker government. We feel that there is no dearth of educated, honest and competent men and women in the country who can not only run the affairs of the government well, but can talk and present themselves before the nation with proper dignity and demeanour.

We have to remember that, even though for a short period, they represent the entire country before the world.

Therefore, no one expects an adviser to come before the camera ill-informed, ill-briefed and ill-rehearsed, with the lack of skill to articulate, thereby make a hash of the whole thing.

Unfortunately, we have witnessed such displays of incompetence on the part of some advisers of the immediate past caretaker

government. They were total misfits in their roles, and we are happy to see their backs.

Therefore, the chief adviser has to look deep into the qualifications of men and women before selecting them to work as advisers.

Cleansing the unclean

So far we have talked about the faults and flaws of the immediate past caretaker government. Now let us turn our attention towards the presently functioning caretaker government. That the advent of this government has been hailed with silent cheers by all and sundry is now an old story.

Let's not dwell on that. The pertinent question of the day is: What can this government do, and should do?

To find the answer one has to go and talk to the common people

who walk the pavements. To put it as bluntly as most of them have told this writer: "First of all, the government along with the army must kick some big posteriors who became millionaires overnight through destroying the last shred of business decorum, order and ethics. If they cannot do that, catching some small fries will not solve the problems. Emboldened, the big fries would only come back with renewed vigor and vengeance to further loot and plunder, having the belief that they are above the law. Are they above the law?"

Does the present caretaker government have the answer? Well, they may not have it at the moment, but through undertaking some bold and significant steps they will eventually go nearer to the answer.

They have to listen to the voice of the people, which is clear and loud. They are unanimous in putting before the caretaker government their list of objectives, the first and foremost of which is driving the corrupt people from politics and administration.

People are standing rock-solid behind the government so that it may achieve this important objective.

Therefore, let not the interim

caretaker government miss the given chance (given by Providence!) to launch more vigorously and more pervasively the cleansing operation to purge the nation of the unclean who have been polluting the ambit of politics and civil administration for the last thirty years, especially last ten years.

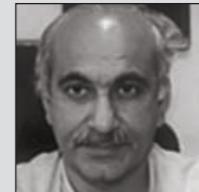
Just as polythene bags choke our drains and sewers, corrupt politicians, government officials and police officials have choked all the channels to put good governance on the decline. And it's time to apply corrosive chemicals to cleanse those clogged channels.

There is wide consensus among the masses that it is now or never. That is, the caretaker government will have to act now, since they are not likely to get a second chance to do what the people want them to do in all sincerity -- launch a colossal purging operation.

The onus now rests on them to put the country in reverse gear to get away from the edge of the precipice and change the course; to give democracy a chance and rescue politics from the unholy grip of black money. Lastly, they will have to pave the way for a free, fair and credible election after clearing the debris of the last fifteen years.

Shahnoor Wahid is Senior Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

Hema in Bhojpur



MJ AKBAR

BYLINE

India is a free country of free people, and the Indian's right to seek one's future in any part of his country is an unambiguous right. Hema Malini could do us all a very important service if she could persuade everyone on the Shiv Sena-BJP platform to accept this. The BJP, which sent the actress to Parliament, claims to be a national party and acts like a regional one. When it makes up its mind, it should send a circular to those on its Page 3 long-list.

Tamil Nadu and N.T. Rama Rao in Andhra Pradesh were outstanding, indeed far better in public life than on the public screen.

The great veteran M. Karunanidhi has worked closely with the industry, and, of course, his bete noire Jayalalithaa has also proved that you can be a competent leader of your state after a career in films.

I suspect that if Shatrughan Sinha ever sees his dream turn into reality and becomes chief minister of Bihar, he won't be that bad either.

Amitabh Bachchan is a remarkably mature and intelligent person, without foppish sentimentality and with genuine concern for the deprived; with his communication skills he would have been a magnetic leader if he had remained in politics.

However, I cannot see Hema Malini as a future Ahalyabai, and her husband Dharmendra might not quite make the grade as another Rana of Mewar. As for someone like Govinda, he still doesn't look as if he quite knows what he is doing.

Hema Malini is in the Rajya Sabha because Indian democracy wants its Page 3. The main political parties, including Congress

and BJP, have decided that they could do with a few cheerleaders whose primary role is that of a magnet.

Their function is to draw crowds since regular politicians can't elevate more than a yawn. I suppose there is nothing more dispiriting for a candidate than to bellow into thin air.

With Hema Malini around, the candidate can be certain that there will be a few people around to check the quality of face or, perhaps, surface.

While, therefore, it may be sensible to put a Hema Malini on display at election time, it is not so wise to let her open her mouth. There has traditionally been a place, at rallies, for entertainers, including poets, who are hired to ease the restlessness of crowds waiting for a leader to arrive.

I suppose it would be too much to ask Hema Malini to do the Bharatnatyam at every political rally, but someone could put together an inoffensive standard patter-page. The temptation to go off and say something honest is best resisted.

That, of course, is the only problem with Hema Malini's now famous advice to "outsiders" that if they can't succeed in Mumbai they

should return to their villages.

She was honest where a more practised political professional might have dissimulated, using the craft of phraseology to suggest to his audience that while his heart lay in thinly-veiled racism, his lips would remain sealed because there were nasty reporters lurking around.

Hema Malini has only repeated what the Shiv Sena has been saying since it became a force in Maharashtra.

The irony of course is lost on Hema Malini. Shiv Sena started life by telling South Indians that they were not sons of Mumbai's soil. Hema probably did not pay attention then; she was busy listening to a carefree Rajesh Khanna wonder what tomorrow would bring: "Zindagi ik safar hai suhana, yahan kal kya ho kisne jaana."

Tomorrow has arrived, and look what it's brought, a place on the Shiv Sena-BJP dais. By her own yardstick, Hema and her husband Dharmendra, native of Punjab, are safe.

They succeeded, so they don't have to return to their village. It's all those slumdruggers Bhaiyyas and Biharis, stupid Olivers who keep asking for more, who need a return

ticket.

A couple of weeks ago a few gunmen from a group called Ulfa persuaded Biharis in Assam to find their way to railway platforms, but I have it on the best authority that Hema Malini has no wish to be that instant.

Fog-lifters have to clear up what cheerleaders leave in their wake. A clarification has been issued which, in the classic tradition of all clarifications, begins by blaming that serpent in democracy's Garden of Eden, the media.

All those reporters, it is actually they who should be sent home first. Poor, innocent, sinless Hema was at some function where reporters, instead of being good little boys and girls and watching the show, kept pestering her with questions.

Moreover, she was unable to hear the questions clearly, but being the fabulous sport that she is, went ahead and answered questions that she could not hear. "I replied in a humorous way," she explained through her personal fog-lifter, a certain M.A. Mehta, "merely to keep them away."

That's it, then. She did not want to keep North Indians away from Mumbai, she wanted to keep reporters away from Hema Malini. That is a far more honourable objective.

If an election were held on that issue, I daresay the North Indians of Mumbai would give Hema their unanimous support, particularly since she noted that she had the highest respect for North Indians.

Evidence? She had acted in a Bhojpuri film once! And just the other day she danced at the Kumbha mela in Allahabad. What more could a reasonable Bhaiyya want from a Rajya Sabha member?

Ms Malini may, of course, have been thinking of success as the criterion for eligibility in Mumbai, rather than race. In which case, she has understood her city wrong.

Mumbai is a city of aspiration, not success. In Ms Malini's old profession, I doubt if even 1% succeed. That does not prevent the other 99% plus from aspiring. The success of Mumbai lies precisely in the fact that it is full of failures.

You can only fail if you try, and everyone comes to Mumbai only to give his and her destiny a chance. There is no other city in India with the range of opportunity that Mumbai provides, which is why so many hearts break on its hard, perhaps even harsh, pavements.

Mumbai makes fortunes with as little sentiment as it says no. It is easier to keep Mumbai away from the rest of India, Hemaji, than to keep the rest of India away from Mumbai.

There was one sentence of genuine clarity in the statement issued in Hema Malini's name: she had no authority to advise North Indians to leave Mumbai, she said. Spot on.

India is a free country of free people, and the Indian's right to seek one's future in any part of his country is an unambiguous right. Hema Malini could do us all a very important service if she could persuade everyone on the Shiv Sena-BJP platform to accept this.

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MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

A credible election or an election of sorts?



M ABDUL HAFIZ

PERSPECTIVES

It's true that an indefinite prolongation of unrepresentative government is neither good nor desirable, but the question is that of holding a credible election that the interim setup has been entrusted with. They must be able to fulfill that mandate, even if the time frame has to be stretched. Although the caretaker government can easily wash its hands off by holding an election of sorts and pack off, it seems to have volunteered to clear the mess before a meaningful election can be held. It is under no obligation to do so. But if it were willing to do it, it would be wise to avail of that opportunity.

and the lethal clash of the opposing political camps was averted.

The next day a non-partisan interim government headed by Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed, a former governor of Bangladesh Bank, was sworn in with Professor Iajuddin Ahmed retaining only his presidential hat.

His speech on the occasion of his relinquishment of caretaker authority as well as the stance of the new caretaker set up -- the creation of a level playing ground before the election -- vindicated some of the demands for electoral reforms that the AL-led alliance had been agitating for.

After the pillars of BNP's election strategy crumbled one after another it's camouflaged support base in the presidency was practically dismantled, with Professor Iajuddin no more enjoying executive authority, and showing no tilt for his party as before.

The quirks generated by the developments caught the four party alliance somewhat off guard, dealing a severe blow to its game plan for recapturing the citadel of power in its scripted way -- rendering all of its earlier political calculations haywire. Overwhelmed by the set-back that it suffered made the alliance

recoil from the politics' forefront.

As a result, the BNP is, at least for the moment, out in the cold, and moods have been dampened in its camp. Obviously the BNP is still trying to come to terms with the bitter changes, and a reality not quite savoured by it.

Yet, there is no guarantee that the BNP-Jamaat alliance has adequately been defanged, and that it will not take recourse to another round of scheming in the future.

They are still left with a reportedly fantastic amount of money acquired through patronized plunder, land grabbing and syndicated exploitation of market. When the power of this money is let loose during the election it cannot but make a tremendous impact on the outcome.

Their tentacles have been cleverly planted in the administration, law enforcing and intelligence agencies, as well as educational and cultural institutions and organizations, to uphold and promote BNP-Jamaat agenda.

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