

Netting the corrupt

The operation must continue

THE public reaction to the arrests of the prominent figures belonging to various groups including the two major political parties says all about the rightfulness of the attempt by the caretaker government to rid the country of the bad. Public reaction has been positive. All those that would like to see our country cleansed of the corrupt have welcomed it.

Although we are not aware as yet of the specific charges against the arrested persons, their antecedents suggest that their misuse and abuse of position and political link to feather their own nest to the detriment of the state's interest have had much to do with it. Some are also alleged to have links with the Islamic extremists.

We appreciate the government action and would like to see it continue till those that have exploited the resources of the state at the expense of this poor nation have been netted and brought to justice. We feel that arrest is less than half the job done. It is important that not only are charges framed without delay, it must also be made public and the arrested persons also be afforded all the due process of law.

While we would like to see that they are brought to justice quickly, speedy trial must not circumvent the existing legal process. We want that process to be speeded up. While many of the arrested political leaders had, when they had their say, shown scant respect for the rule of law and the legal system, we must commit ourselves to shun that path and, by recourse to an open and transparent legal procedure, reestablish the rule of law that was so badly denuded of both its substance and essence, particularly over the last five years.

It must be remembered too that the success of the current government to rid the country of the corrupt depend on how successful it is in demolishing the possibility of future nexus between the corrupt politicians, businessmen and the bureaucrats. And that will depend on how effectively those arrested upto now, and will be soon, are brought to book. We understand too that cleansing our system that is so inexorably mired in corruption is perhaps a very tall order for this government. It is a good start. And it will suffice if we can send the correct message to the dishonest, corrupt and the shady, that their errant ways may be of benefit to them but only temporarily, and that they would have to face justice and made to account for their misdeed ultimately.

Olive branch to Democrats

Bush's deepening misery over Iraq

NOTHING can be more uncomfortable for an American president than turning into a lame duck. But that again is what all presidents lucky enough to be elected to a second term have experienced, of course to their dismay. American citizens have looked upon a second-term occupant of the White House as a man in patient wait for retirement. At the same time, politicians have focused on the future, some through a honing of their own skills for probable presidential leadership. It is this latter bit which is on display in Washington these days. With the likes of Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, John McCain and John Edwards eyeing the White House in a post-Bush period, it is fairly understandable why George W. Bush should be feeling rather lonely these days.

There are other reasons for Mr. Bush to be lonely. His policy in Iraq has about collapsed; and with more than 3,000 US soldiers dead in an insurgency the administration neither foresaw nor expected, the twilight for the president appears to be descending sooner than expected. With both houses of Congress in the control of Democrats, he has been forced into holding out an olive branch to those who have been opposing his conduct of the war. Fundamentally, the olive branch is a plea for bipartisan support over Iraq. But the spirit of bipartisan ship has already run into trouble over the administration's plan to add 21,000 more troops to the already existing 132,000 in Iraq. Not even Mr. Bush's fellow Republicans -- and they include such vocal senators as Chuck Hagel -- are willing to strengthen his hands. Mr. Hagel keeps drawing attention to the futility of the war he fought in Vietnam. Iraq, he reasons, cannot be any different. And then there are the Democrats, nearly all of whom are leaping across one another to offer ways out of the crisis. They think they can ensure a recapture of the presidential office in 2008 by endlessly talking about the mess President Bush has created.

Mr. Bush once called himself the decider of policy. Now a fellow Republican, Senator Arlen Specter, has told him he is not the sole decider. Misery cannot go any deeper.

The caretaker government: To be or not to be

Bangladesh's image will also have improved dramatically while economic gains will have been strengthened and properly distributed. Many believe that now is that window of opportunity and that "haste will make waste." Hence, the current CG ought to be given time, space, resources and flexibility to straighten out the wrinkles, although their actions, too, ought to be carefully and closely watched.

SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

THE writing on the wall is plain and simple: The caretaker government must stay on. That is the people's mandate -- surely that is democracy! The exhortations of people from several quarters to quickly announce a firm date for the elections seem to be the machinations of vested quarters to return quickly to the status quo.

I do not detect any such demands from the grassroots. I might even venture to hypothesize that the electorate is in no hurry for an election right now. A referendum could easily (dis)prove my hypothesis. Alternatively, some scientific polling may be in order to check the nation's mood on the matter.

From what I gather, the toiling, alienated, impoverished, terrorized and seemingly enslaved people of the land are interested, first and foremost, in a caretaker government (CG) that would bring about a wholesale cleanup of rampant corruption, ensure a safe and secure environment (witness the city of grills and night-guards), and introduce appropriate changes in governance structures and processes that would enable the people to choose their "true" representatives.

Human failures, and the concomitant corruption, are at the core of Bangladesh's sorry state of governance. Multiple parties have been afflicted by this malignant ailment over the years, three being most prominent among them.

First, there are those self-

Attributes	Politicians (n=434)	Bureaucrats (n=405)	Business/Industrialists (n=405)
Sincere	3.36	4.07	4.67
Competent	3.44	4.90	5.11
Selfish	7.03	5.94	6.85
Arrogant	5.56	5.37	5.66
Patriotic	3.61	4.22	3.85
Honest	2.60	3.36	3.21
Trustworthy	2.91	3.88	4.00

indulgent, insincere, and ego-maniacal politicians who have sacrificed the nation for their personal glory and gains, and who have made fortunes that will last them multiple lifetimes. Perhaps they have reincarnation in mind, to come back and enjoy the loot over and over again.

Then there are the corrupt, distanced, and arrogant civil administration officials who have been a scourge for society, preying on the weak, while lapping up to the strong. The CA has taken them to task verbally. How this wily bunch will act or react is yet to be seen.

There are also the private sector businesses that often work hand-in-hand with the other two to dupe the general public, rob them of their sustenance, and terrify them when needed, as they merrily manipulate markets, information, prices, supplies, labour pools, and even the quality of products. It is this same private sector syndicate that is now crying wolf, knowing fully well that they themselves had a hand in creating the "corruption" monster by seeking personal privileges and gains, that now threatens to

usurp their ill-begotten riches.

An opinion poll I conducted about ten years ago in two phases in Dhaka city gives a rough flavour of how people view these three classes of people. I doubt if things have changed for the better.

The ratings on a scale of 1-10 (not 0-10) are certainly not anything to gloat about. Given these enduring and sticky perceptions, what is the prognosis for immediate election? Would it not merely reinstate most of the same players, and return the nation to the same yoke and misery?

The problem of human failures (aka "opportunism" in the academic world) is a basic obstacle to the country's progress, requiring immediate and undivided attention. This problem is neither new, nor is it emblematic of Bangladesh alone, and must be understood in its fundamental context. Research in the areas of agency theory and transaction costs economics has led to Nobel prizes for elegant analyses of this problem.

Similarly, political scientists have dealt with the concept of legitimacy, i.e. how governments

win and lose their claims of rectitude and moral authority, while sociologists have coined the notion of social capital that emphasizes the need for trust and cooperation within communities to achieve collective goals. Incidentally, it has been empirically shown that nations with higher social capital are more economically advanced. What is most important is to recognize the fundamental deficiency -- human failures -- that Bangladesh faces in terms of the country's governance.

Evidence abounds in many countries that human failures can be managed. At this point in time, whether Bangladesh faces a constitutional conundrum, whether elections must be held within X number of days, whether ballot boxes ought to be transparent, whether an unblemished voter list can be prepared, or whether ID cards should be issued represent peripheral issues -- although they ought to be in our purview.

What is more important and substantive is that an opportunity has opened up in Bangladesh for managing human failures, that would better guarantee the people the basics of sustenance (food, health care, education), a safe and secure environment, the options to pursue opportunities of their choice, and enjoy conditions to live with dignity and self-respect while enhancing their self-worth.

Who can bring about this change effectively and expeditiously? If a CG can detach itself from party affiliation, establish and communicate clear and measurable goals, involve society's jewels (not the fake ones), work methodically, take bold steps, and guide the nation with a steady hand to bring about fundamental reforms that past politicians have ignored, or not bothered to comprehend, for



lack of desire and/or ability, it will have left behind a stable and enduring polity before handing it back to the "right" band of people's representatives via elections.

Bangladesh's image will also have improved dramatically while economic gains will have been strengthened and properly distributed. Many believe that now is that window of opportunity and that "haste will make waste." Hence, the current CG

ought to be given time, space, resources and flexibility to straighten out the wrinkles, although their actions, too, ought to be carefully and closely watched.

This should keep the CG focused and on track. It is also likely to keep them honest... lest human failures begin to creep in amongst the entrusted team!

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A humble submission to the leaders of the two main political alliances

Time is fast running out. You simply have to mend your ways or else matters are bound to slip out of your hands. This is the turning point of your existence. There have to be major tactical changes in your politics. You must shun the path of militancy, hatred, and anger, and reject the path of retaliatory politics.

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

SOME people are debating over the nature of the present caretaker government. How long is it going to stay? Some have even described it as more of an interim government than a caretaker government.

All of you also expressed your desire to see the present caretaker government quit and hand over power to an elected government soon. You have made guarded remarks while welcoming the present caretaker government.

But, above everything else, what I find missing here is the explicit admission of the mistakes made by all of you that have largely contributed to the coming of the emergency now prevailing in the country.

I do not know when, but someday soon, the reins of the government will rest with one of you and your party... it is about then

that I remain highly concerned. It is my observation that how-ever many cardinal sins had been committed by the last elected government, the fact remains that the burden of the guilt also lies with the main opposition party and other lesser ones.

No matter how noble the objectives were, the methods applied in achieving them were not only violent, but also, to my mind, medieval in nature.

I do not know about others, but I am fully convinced that whenever there has been a promulgation of emergency rule or coming of an unelected government in the region, more so in Bangladesh, it has been caused by explicit failures on the part of the political parties.

Now that there is a lull in your "activities," it is time to ponder upon, and make an analytical review of, the mistakes you have made in the past. Despite the

fact that you may argue that many of the moves now being taken for restructuring and revitalizing the various key organizations/institutions are the result of your recently launched movements for restoration of "people's rights," at the same time it will not be incorrect to say that the so called struggle or movement has also snatched away peoples rights. It has, at the same time, put in jeopardy the healthy trend in the growth of our economy not to speak of the very image of the country.

I believe that it is now high time that you and I think seriously, and carefully chalk out a plan for stopping this curse of politicizing of not only the civil administration but also the society at large. In democracy it is bad practice to adopt the policy of "divide and rule," or rule by default. Failure to do this will bring about disastrous consequences for the nation at large.

We are already faced with that possibility. After all, in time to come it is you who will be entrusted with the responsibility of administering the country.

I have this feeling that your recent behaviour has also overtly hurt the very self-esteem and dignity of this nation. Just consider this, today more than ever before, we are beholden to a select number of representatives of some powerful countries of the West including some international donor organizations.

The entire nation, in a way, is held hostage by them. Today, it is they who are calling the shots. Today, it is they who are giving us our daily lessons in democracy and democratic norms. It is they who are telling us as to how to hold free and fair elections, and it is they who are telling us to do this and that or else face consequences.

It is them, and their gleaming faces that you get to see in both our electronic and the print media. Do you realize why this has happened? It is simply the result of your collective failures. It is because of you that these people, who are non-entities in their own countries, are having a field day at our expense.

Much time has been lost in arguing and fixing blame on each other with regard to who is doing what to whom in connection with containing and arresting the spread of the ugly curse of religious terrorism in the country.

We can no longer sit back and indulge in the empty rhetoric of how moderate we are in our beliefs as a state in which the majority are Muslims. Indeed, you need to go for a serious soul searching in this regard, more so the oldest and the most experienced party of them all.

This aspect alone has the potential for making or breaking this nation. Someone the other day told me that at a time when the rest of the world is traveling to the moon we are still living in the world of fatwa.

You must simply devise ways and means to keep politics away from religion. Stop using and abusing religion to meet your selfish political goals, or else you will sink along with the nation.

I also have this feeling that you seriously lack in vision and have this tendency of living in the past. The past is important, but cannot be the all encompassing factor in shaping our

present or the future. Our glorious history alone shall not take the country forward, we must also work, and work hard now, in the living present.

You have turned politics into a profitable business enterprise, rather than a vehicle for protecting, serving and working for the welfare of the people. You have continually, for years, made fools of the people and misled them.

Most of you, particularly the leaders of your parties, live a life of affluence and luxury. It is because of you that many innocent lives have been lost and families ruined. When Nobel laureate Dr Muhammad Yunus called you "corrupt," and instruments for money making, I am afraid he is not far from the truth.

Time is fast running out. You simply have to mend your ways or else matters are bound to slip out of your hands. This is the turning point of your existence. There have to be major tactical changes in your politics. You must shun the path of militancy, hatred, and anger, and reject the path of retaliatory politics.

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People hate free-market policies



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

EACH January, scores of Indian businessmen and ministers make a pilgrimage to the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland. Fawning attendance upon them are journalists, most of them on all-expenses-paid trips.

They breathlessly describe the talk-fest among the world's filthy-rich as distilled policy wisdom from a learned institution.

However, the WEF is not an academic, non-partisan institution committed to dispassionate discussion.

Its core consists of the chief executive officers (CEOs) of the world's top 1,000 corporations. They go to Davos to influence the policy-makers of the 70 to 90

As many as 52 percent believe that the rich have gained the most from neo-liberal policies. Only 31 percent expect India's economic situation to improve in the next six months. Thirty-nine percent don't believe that the UPA has successfully implemented the National Common Minimum Program. This shows a huge disconnect between official policies and public perceptions. The UPA will be sleepwalking into disaster if it fails to correct course.

governments who turn up. At Davos, much of the discussion takes place in closed sessions. Participants pay \$25,000 to attend these. This is over and above the \$23,000 companies pay to join WEF, in addition to the \$12,500 annual membership fee.

Everything at WEF is up for sale, including meeting agendas -- at a price ranging from \$78,000 to \$250,000.

The overwhelming thrust of WEF recommendations is to promote the interests of large multi-national corporations and lobby for neo-liberal globalisation.

The annual WEF is a pilgrimage in that attending it is an act of faith -- blind faith in corporate-led globalisation. It involves dogmatically rejecting any alternative vision.

It also means, as it did last fortnight, ignoring signs of a slowdown in the world economy.

In recent years, globalisation has drawn sharp criticism for promoting skewed growth and widening rich-poor disparities. But Indian finance ministers and senior officials unfailingly appear at Davos to convince CEOs that "emerging superpower" India remains dedicated to free-market "reforms."

This year, Planning Commission Deputy Chairman Montek Singh Ahluwalia and Commerce Minister Kamal Nath went to Davos (at public expense, of course) to promote "Brand India."

They reassured corporations that India is ready to receive \$150 billion over five years to build its infrastructure; as a

worthy partner of Big Business, India is pursuing the full range of "free-market" policies, from deregulation to privatisation.

Their Davos speeches reflect the dominant post-1991 consensus in India's policy-making elite. This consensus has proved strong even under the United Progressive Alliance.

The UPA is pursuing policies which run against the expectations raised by the 2004 elections that brought it to power.

The election results were a powerful rejection of the Bharatiya Janata Party's neo-liberal "India Shining" campaign. Dr Manmohan Singh recognised this and promised inclusive growth.

That was not to be. Recent UPA policies, including investing pension funds in corporate shares, further privatising the

infrastructure, allowing foreign investment in education, and reducing taxes on luxury goods, all point to the neo-liberal consensus.

Indeed, the consensus has percolated into the 11th Five-Year Plan.

Further confirmation of this was provided by the list of Padma award nominees. The list is packed with conservatives like the pro-American former bureaucrat Naresh Chandra, and right-wing economists like Jeffrey Sachs, TN Srinivasan and Raja Chellalaiah. Then come CEOs JJ Irani, Sunil Mittal, NRI Indra Nooyi (of PepsiCo), and O. Suzuki.

These men and women don't represent inclusiveness or compassion. Mr Sachs wrought epochal damage upon the former Soviet Union through mindless policies in the early 1990s.

Russia was rapidly de-industrialised, incomes were halved, and within five years, life-expectancy plummeted by 10 years.

Indian policy-makers should know better. Recent opinion polls show that the Indian people don't support neo-liberal

reforms.

As many as 72 percent are not even aware of the policy changes made since 1991 in agriculture, industry, finance, disinvestment, etc according to a Hindustan Times-CNN-IBN survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, based on a sample of 7,681 people in 19 states.

Only three percent are "well-informed" about the changes. Another 14 percent are only "somewhat informed."

The Indian public overwhelmingly (62 percent) believes that the post-1991 policies have "only benefited the rich." The percentage is even higher (68) among the poor. (Even half the rich think that!)

This is so despite the view of 56 percent that the economy has "improved" over the past 10 years, as has their family's financial situation. So this judgment on the pro-rich bias of India's policies appears to be a considered one, not derived from a generalised "gloom-and-doom" outlook.

The survey exposes growing standards-of-living disparities

over the past decade. Over 70 percent of the urban rich report improvement in the quality of food, clothing and medical facilities. For the urban poor, the proportion is 50 percent, for the rural poor closer to 40.

Even more stunning, people overwhelmingly believe that public services should remain public. Between 67 and 71 percent want the government to run power and water supply, hospitals, and schools. Only 13 to 14 percent want private companies to operate these services.

What's more, a majority (about two-thirds) are willing to pay more for better public services -- especially for education in state schools and treatment in public hospitals.

CSDS researchers conclude: "The Indian public is, on balance, clearly opposed to disinvestments... downsizing of the government and entry of foreign companies." Those well-informed about these policies are twice more strongly opposed to them than the less-informed.

Most Indians do not support direct tax cuts. They want the

rich to be taxed more "to help the poor." The sole exception to this are the urban rich.

The latest "India Today-AC Nielsen-ORG-MARG" poll (February 5) confirms the same trends as the CSDS. The Indian public's greatest worries are rising prices (39 percent) and unemployment (33 percent).

As many as 52 percent believe that the rich have gained the most from neo-liberal policies. Only 31 percent expect India's economic situation to improve in the next six months. Thirty-nine percent don't believe that the UPA has successfully implemented the National Common Minimum Program.

This shows a huge disconnect between official policies and public perceptions. The UPA will be sleepwalking into disaster if it fails to correct course.

Such correction can be neither superficial nor a mere public relations apology for neo-liberalism. What's needed is honest appraisal of policy flaws -- and a radical change of direction.

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