

Never again

We must develop durable systems for accountability and good governance that create the capability for self-righting and internal correction that characterize the world's greatest democracies.

REZA KIBRIA

THE great Government we loved has too often been made use of for private and selfish purposes, and those who used it had forgotten the people...We have made up our minds to square every process of our national life again with the standards we have so proudly set up at the beginning and have always carried at our hearts."

President Woodrow Wilson, "First Inaugural" (1913), in M.I. Urofsky (1994), "Basic Readings in US Democracy," USIS, Washington DC, p. 203.

The dramatic events of early February sent shockwaves throughout Bangladesh. Powerful political figures from both major parties were detained for questioning by the security forces, under the direction of the caretaker government.

For some, it came as a rude awakening that guns, money and power could fail to provide protection against a challenge to their hitherto unassailable authority. To many, however, the wave of arrests has signaled the end of an age of darkness.

We have just been through a period in which murder could be committed without fear of retribution; fortunes could be made through political corruption without any threat of legal or administrative action. Public interest could be neglected without accountability, and key institutions of the republic could be abased for political purposes without challenge.

It was difficult to overcome a feeling of helplessness in the face of a seemingly all-powerful coalition of greed, intolerance and evil. Politics had come to be regarded as a route to easy riches and unquestioned power, without any prospect of a day of reckoning in this world. There now seems to be a chance to change all that.

What caused this dramatic turn of events? What were the forces behind the sudden emergence of the present caretaker government (CG) on January 11? What lies behind the resolve to arrest such a powerful set of individuals, including some whose very names arouse fear and dread? Can these bold initiatives be sustained? Some of the thieves are being caught -- but why not the biggest ones?

What about murderers and patrons of terrorists? Will the financial beneficiaries of the war crimes of 1971 continue to evade accountability? Will victims of murder and terrorism be compensated by seizure of assets of the perpetrators of these crimes?

There continues to be much interest in all these important questions. There are also attempts to try to identify the principal actors and their respective roles. These speculations are certainly interesting, as they may point to future directions of the CG.

One important point to emphasize is this: the CG could act as it did because it recognized -- quite correctly -- that public opinion would be overwhelmingly in favour of such decisive action.

In a nation that has few of the generally accepted means of gauging public opinion between general elections (such as regular opinion polls, mid-term elections, fair by-elections), the best indication of the electorate's mood came from the media.

The media exposed the rampant corruption, systematic political killings and brutal treatment of the

opposition, persecution of minorities and critics, state acquiescence, and even patronization, of fundamentalist terrorist groups, administrative incompetence and politicization of institutions such as the civil service, that characterized the five years of misrule by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-Jamaat-I-Islami (JI) coalition.

Civil society certainly played a part in raising public awareness of these problems, but one must remember that they were only able to do so because of extensive media coverage.

Many people -- including large numbers who had voted for the BNP-JI coalition -- had resolved to express their displeasure through the ballot box. However, hopes for a free and fair election rapidly receded.

The lack of neutrality in the Election Commission and the first CG that took office after the departure of the BNP-JI government, together with evidence of massive fraud in the preparation of the voter-list, made it clear to all that the general elections originally scheduled for January 22 would be rigged.

In this regard the positive role of the "grand alliance" in vociferously opposing such a sham of an election should not be conveniently forgotten. Some individuals even made the ridiculous suggestion

that the January 22 elections "needed" to take place to preserve "democracy."

These are the same people who, in a wonderful show of evenhandedness, blamed both, the victims of killings and the killers, for the confrontational politics and violence of the past five years. Fortunately, the voices of these apologists for the BNP-JI election-rigging conspiracy were drowned out by the strength of the mass protests.

The public revulsion at what was happening certainly came through, despite the intimidation and the violence, thanks largely to a bold and courageous journalistic fraternity.

During the term of the previous BNP-JI government in particular, there were times when all those who had been wronged or oppressed felt that the press represented their last and only recourse for obtaining justice, or even a fair hearing. The nation owes a deep debt of gratitude to the press and media for standing up for truth, justice and accountability, even when all seemed lost.

We now appear to have a chance to start anew, to restore and rejuvenate our institutions, to rededicate ourselves to the ideals and values that inspired our War of Liberation. To do this in a meaningful manner, it is vital that we learn from our own experience, and from



that of other emerging democracies.

We must develop effective mechanisms to ensure that the mistakes of the past can be avoided. Never again should political power be exercised without accountability or checks and balances.

Never again should money and guns dominate our politics. Never again should a climate of impunity prevail. Never again should anyone be in a position to undermine the rule of law and the institutions of the republic. Never again should any of our citizens -- whatever their creed or religion -- be condemned to live in fear.

It is vital that we develop mechanisms that will ensure that our democracy will endure. To guard against the emergence of autocratic rule, such a democracy would need to be liberal and plural-

ist in nature.

The last 15 years in Bangladesh have highlighted the "winner takes all" syndrome, under which virtually all power accrues to the winning side. There was a failure to develop a system of strong and well-funded elected local governments that would have moderated the impact of political swings at the national level.

Reforms are needed to enhance the effectiveness of our representative bodies and to protect our national institutions from being undermined and captured by narrow political interests (i.e., politicized).

There has been a loss of confidence in key public institutions over the past five years that will need to be reversed. To reduce the likelihood of such problems it may be useful to draw upon the experience of various successful democ-

racies, including the United States, the United Kingdom and India.

We must develop durable systems for accountability and good governance that create the capability for self-righting and internal correction that characterize the world's greatest democracies.

Like any other system of governance, mistakes will happen under any democracy. What is important is that there should be robust institutional mechanisms to rectify such mistakes.

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But who will give the nation economic democracy?

The kind of agrarian reform we need may involve legal complications which may not be solvable under normal laws of the country. Nor may the initiation of such reform be expected from any party of "jotdar/money-lending" background.

MD ANISUR RAHMAN

THE country is on its way to a better system of political democracy, thanks to the intervention by the armed forces and determined cleaning up operations by the CTG, along with the strengthening of some institutions of governance.

All this is very welcome. But unless accompanied by equally decisive measures to promote "economic democracy," the political and governance reforms will keep the feudal character of the political and economic functioning of the country intact.

The result will still be missing the great potential the nation has to be another "Asian Tiger," keeping the bulk of our people downtrodden, seeking favours of patrons for their survival against the odds and, essentially, opening the country more to foreign investment to exploit the cheap labour of our people.

Without decisive reforms to promote economic democracy we shall, at best, have "fair" elections

and improved governance. The election of 2001 was generally considered to be fair. One rather comical trait of it was reported by our departed national poet Shamsur Rahman in a citizen's conference held after the election. He narrated a dialogue he had had with women in a village. Referring to the extraordinarily large turnout of women to vote in this election, he asked them what was their consideration in deciding whom to vote for. The reply, with a shy glimmer in the face, was: "Ranir lahan dekhitey (she looks like a queen)" Some indication, indeed, of "women power!"

Let us make no mistake about this: the nation remains, overwhelmingly, a country of economically and socially very disadvantaged people who are locked in patron-client relations with the well-to-do and powerful, essentially rentier, classes - jotdars/middlemen/money-lenders. The economic and social institutions of the country are, as a rule, in the grip of such rentier classes, with a two-way relationship with the downtrodden: on the one hand the "master"

exploits them in all sorts of ways to enjoy their cheap labour and appropriate their property with all kinds of manipulations, and, often, force; on the other hand when a downtrodden is in the direst distress a generous-looking hand may be extended to help him/her barely keep head above water, with exploitative money-lending kind, or even seemingly charitable kind of means making the victim infinitely grateful for the act, and hopeful that such help as a last resort to survive will continue to be available if one serves the kindly "master" well.

A fair contest for national elections essentially means extending a party's net to catch the largest number of such hapless clients without taking recourse to visible terrorism, and it is no secret that as little as Tk 20 and putting one on a truck on the way to the polling station is often sufficient to win a vote.

This kind of patron-client relation is actually the meaning of "large grass-roots base," that such-and-such a jotdar-middlemen-money lender party is said to have, in



assessing a party's electoral prospects. And we know that the parties have no serious plans and programs to lead the nation to the path of high economic growth with equity that has characterized the performance of the "Asian Tigers" in recent times. Instead, all are dangerously over-relying on one single industrial sector -- the garments industry -- and remittances from our expatriates as growth engines. And we are wasting the potential our people have to join as major actors in the nation's entre-

preneurship to fly much higher and show that we, too, can have spectacular growth with equity by following principles that are today well known in development thinking.

For shortage of space I shall not elaborate much on these principles, except to refer to Professor Rehman Sobhan's outstanding work some time back on "Agrarian Reform and Social Transformation." I have always maintained that this work was worthy of the Nobel in economics -- but, alas, this prize is never given to

work with radical overtones.

Although it was the United States which was behind the progressive agrarian reforms in Japan and South Korea for strategic reasons, the interest of this global master in our economy today seems to be different -- to have a system of good governance in order that private capital can come and exploit our cheap labour which, therefore, has to be kept cheap. Therefore, no agrarian reform to liberate our rural workers, to bid as entrepreneurs themselves in our growth process and to give the nation both higher growth and equity, seems likely.

The country, indeed, was poised to take-off on a path to high growth with equity after independence. But alas, the first Planning Commission's proposals for land reform was turned down by the then ruling "jotdar party," an event that had made the architect of our liberation war and the then planning minister, Tajuddin Ahmed, literally break down in tears.

Will the present CTG and our patriotic army also fall into the trap of mere political democracy and good governance thinking? They have got this opportunity that does not come often in the lifetime of a nation, to help the country truly rise to its promise. This promise is not merely to raise the country's growth rate of GDP --

meaning gross domestic product -- by a couple of percentage points through greater inflow of foreign capital, for the bulk of this higher product will accrue to foreigners and will be taken out of the country. The task is to dramatically raise the country's growth rate of GNP -- gross national product -- i.e. the part of the product that accrues to nationals of the country.

This is a measure that the World Bank, following the interests of its financiers, does not use for assessing growth performances of its client states and, therefore, governments and national economists locked in donor-recipient or research relations with it also do not. And for a country's growth rate of national product to rise fast nationals of the country must, in a much larger measure, own the nation's entrepreneurship and not merely sweat in them.

The kind of agrarian reform we need may involve legal complications which may not be solvable under normal laws of the country. Nor may the initiation of such reform be expected from any party of "jotdar/money-lending" background. It is very important, therefore, that this be accomplished before the pitch is handed over to such parties again. The needed task may never be done, unless it is done now.

In a sense it has been made simpler, because the theoretical and experiential basis of this are by now well known from the experiences of the Asian Tigers, and volumes of analytical reflections on them, from whose pluses and minuses a lot has been learnt.

The first step now is to ask Professor Rehman Sobhan, the country's foremost expert on the subject, and its best ever teacher in development economics, to chair a Commission on Agrarian Reform and submit its recommendations in three months. Couldn't we expect this request to come from the two of his most brilliant and patriotic students who are heading the CTG and its finance ministry, respectively, and their equally patriotic associates in the government?

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The new enemy?

Today, the broader US intelligence community, including the CIA and the Directorate of National Intelligence -- which nominally oversees the agency -- seems to have reached a consensus that the ordnance on display in the Baghdad slide show was made in Iran and transported over the border somehow by the Quds Force.

MICHAEL HIRSH, BABAK DEGHANPISHEH AND MARK HOSENBALL

PRESIDENT Bush officially anointed a new enemy of the United States -- the "Quds Force."

After a week in which his administration contradicted itself repeatedly over the threat from Iran, Bush settled on what he said were the known facts. The sophisticated weapons being used against US troops in Iraq "were provided by the Quds Force," a paramilitary arm of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the president said at a news conference in the East Room.

"We know that. And we also know that the Quds Force is a part of the Iranian government. That's a known. What we don't know is whether or not head leaders of Iran ordered the Quds Force to do what they did."

Just who are the Quds Force? And how good is the intelligence on them, really? A Newsweek investigation shows that the evidence against the Quds Force is still questionable, and that some of the key Iraqi politicians Washington is relying on most, such as Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani, have had close relations with the Iranian group.

The United States found itself on the same side as the Quds Force after 9/11 in the fight against the Taliban, when Quds supported the leader of the Northern Alliance, Ahmed Shah Masoud.

The Quds Force was created by

the IRGC -- the powerful institution created to defend Iran's 1979 Islamist revolution -- toward the end of the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. Its purpose: To conduct operations inside Iraqi territory, especially the Kurdish region that operated somewhat autonomously from Saddam Hussein's government.

"Quds" means "Jerusalem" in Arabic, and the goal of the Islamist revolutionaries who started the group was to take over Jerusalem after capturing Baghdad.

Even after the Iran-Iraq War ended in 1988, the Quds Force, or Quds Brigade as it is also called, maintained three major foreign operations: supporting the Kurds in Iraq against Saddam, backing the Muslim Bosnians against the Serbs and working with Masoud and his Northern Alliance in Afghanistan.

After Masoud was assassinated by Al Qaeda operatives on September 9, 2001, Quds Force members helped the US-assisted Northern Alliance cross the Kokcha River between Tajikistan and Afghanistan and advance toward Kabul to oust the Taliban, according to Iranian officials.

Perhaps no one has benefited from the Quds Force's patronage more than the current president of Iraq, Jalal Talabani, who is also a close US ally. Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) party was Iran's main ally in northern Iraq during the 1980s.

When fighting broke out between rival Kurdish groups in the mid-'90s,

the Quds Force fought on Talabani's side against Massoud Barzani, whose Kurdish party had asked for Saddam Hussein's help.

Today, the Iranian government still maintains that its officials enter Iraq only at the invitation of the Iraqi government.

In an interview with Newsweek, Iran's ambassador to the United Nations, Javad Zarif, said his Shiite nation's "interest is in not undermining the current Iraqi government," which is Shia-dominated. "That's the most important issue," he said, adding that the Bush administration's own recent National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq said the violence in Iraq was largely "self-sustained."

The confusion over the Quds Force -- what exactly they're doing in Iraq and how they came to be there -- has created a dangerous ambiguity about the Iranian operatives who are now being targeted by US forces.

That became clear late last year when key Iraqi politicians complained that US troops had arrested two Iranians who were guests of the Iraqi government. The incident occurred after Talabani hammered out a security agreement with Iranian officials last fall.

In December, two IRGC officials were invited to Iraq, including a man believed to be the third most senior Quds Force official, Mohsen Chizari.

US troops arrested the men, even though they had diplomatic

passports. Talabani demanded immediate release of the Iranians and confirmed that the Iraqi government had invited them.

On the night they were detained, the two Iranians had met with Hadi al-Ameri, head of the Badr Organization, once the militia of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI).

Ameri also heads up the security committee in the Iraqi National Assembly. The two officials had come, Ameri told Newsweek, to discuss security issues.

Ameri said two top Iraqi government officials, Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih and national-security adviser Mowaffaq al-Rubaie, had asked the Iranian government to help rein in the Mahdi Army, the rival Shiite militia directed by radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr that is believed to be responsible for death squads and other sectarian violence, as well as attacks on US troops.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki "wanted Iran's help and said you can influence this issue," Ameri said in an interview. This led to the Iranians sending the group with the diplomatic passports.

He added: "They had a meeting with me and we talked about how to put pressure on the Jaish Mahdi (Mahdi Army) not to attack Sunnis ... how to prevent the Jaish Mahdi from working against the government and not to raise their weapons illegally."

The spokesman for the US-led multinational forces in Iraq, Maj. Gen. William Caldwell, later said that US soldiers had found long lists of weapons inventories in the SCIRI compound where the Iranian officials were staying.

He said SCIRI representatives told the Americans the weapons

were for their protection. The upshot is that while the American military is blaming the Quds Force and IRGC for all sorts of misdeeds, the highest officials in the US-backed Iraqi government appear to be buying weapons from them and asking for their help on security issues.

Yet even if elements of the Quds Force are involved in weapons trafficking, it is unclear if they are being directed by Tehran or if they are freelancing.

After the war in Bosnia in the '90s, some former Quds Force members were known to engage in smuggling, apparently without the knowledge of their central command.

Until this week, US officials were bluntly accusing the Iranian government of involvement in attacks by Iraqi Shiite militias against US troops.

Philip Zelikow, who was Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's senior counselor until he resigned in January, says the accusations "had been simmering for more than a year ... The situation had just gotten worse and worse."

Zelikow, who was briefed regularly on the Iraq intel, told NEWSWEEK that while it's true that Iran is not mainly responsible for the chaos inside Iraq, or attacks on US troops, "it's not good for other governments to kill our soldiers with impunity, especially when we're not going around trying to kill their soldiers. We needed to find a way of letting people know there's a cost to this behavior."

But Zelikow and US officials may have undercut their case by overstating what they actually knew.

A week ago, anonymous US briefers in Baghdad gave reporters a PowerPoint show that included

photos of what were alleged to be high-tech Iranian munitions supplied by the Quds Force, including the so-called explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) that are blasting through US armor and killing American troops.

One briefer, an analyst identified only by his first name, argued that the Quds Force "really report directly to the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei."

As a result, the analyst concluded, "the activities that the IRGC Quds Force are conducting in Iraq, we assess, are coming from the highest levels of the Iranian government."

That line was echoed by White House spokesman Tony Snow, who said: "The Quds Force is, in fact, an official arm of the Iranian government and, as such, the government bears responsibility and accountability for its actions."

But the White House began to shrink from directly implicating Tehran early this week, after Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Peter Pace seemed to disavow the Baghdad briefer's comments. "It is clear that materials from Iran are involved," Pace told reporters. "But I would not say, based on what I know, that the Iranian government clearly knows or is complicit." In his news conference Wednesday, the president appeared to side with Pace's view.

US officials now say the anonymous Baghdad analyst may have made one inference too many.

It is true that the Quds Force is supposed to be under the supervision of Khamenei, who approves their overall strategy together with Rahim Safavi, the commander of the IRGC. But because Khamenei is not a military official, he's not

thought to be apprised of every operation.

Today, the broader US intelligence community, including the CIA and the Directorate of National Intelligence -- which nominally oversees the agency -- seems to have reached a consensus that the ordnance on display in the Baghdad slide show was made in Iran and transported over the border somehow by the Quds Force.

US intelligence officials also say Quds Force members are suspected of manufacturing EFPs inside Iran.

But the documentation remains scant. And considerable doubts continue to surface about the intelligence presented at the Baghdad slide show, including the fact that the writing on the conventional weapons displayed was in English, not Farsi.

U.N. Ambassador Zarif also says that the date markings are American-style -- that is, the month comes first. "There is every reason

to believe that this evidence is fabricated," he said.

US officials say the weapons

were apparently built for the interna-

tional market. Asked why the writing

on the weapons allegedly made in

Iran was in English, one US intelli-

gence official responded: "That's a

very good question."

It is one of many questions about

the Quds Force that has yet to be

answered.

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