

Of politics as usual

Politics as usual, that would put us back on the path to a failed state or, at best, a banana republic, must not continue. The responsible political parties must provide the roadmap for new politics that would nurture democracy in the country and in their own affairs. This includes the new party that Dr. Yunus plans to lead.

MANZOOR AHMED

BY January 11, Bangladesh was at the brink of being a failed government, if not a failed state.

Politics, with a façade of democracy created by an elected parliament, but devoid of the minimal norms and values of democratic culture and behaviour, brought the country to the precipice. Only the declaration of emergency, and the take-over by a second caretaker government within eleven weeks, prevented the impending disaster. If this sounds hyperbolic, recall where we stood as the preparation for election to the ninth national parliament got underway. No one in the country and outside, except the politicians who had just vacated the seats of power, believed that a free and fair election could be held, or that the essential conditions for such an election existed.

The Election Commission failed even to prepare a credible voters'

list. It was amply evident from the nominations, which were submitted to and accepted by the EC, that "muscle and money" would decide the election results. It was also clear that the same motley crowd, whichever party they belonged to, that had collectively pushed the country to the edge of disaster was going to return to parliament.

The CTG, armed with emergency powers, has been unearthing the causes of degeneration and decay that have spread deep into the vital organs of the state and government. The daily meal on our tables has become unsafe, as the seizure of warehouses with tainted and rotten grains, and detection in the market of fish and fruits treated with poisonous chemicals, show.

Supplies for relief of disaster victims ended up in the homes of the ruling coalition bigwigs. The angle of individual interest and that of the ruling coterie was supreme in all decisions of the state, big or small, totally disregarding the harm

caused to national interest.

Just consider the stories in the media on the shenanigans in contracts for power generation, gas exploration, Barapukuria coal mine development, management of Biman, submarine cable connection for digital communication, regulating the telephone, development of the Chittagong port -- the list is long.

The authority and conduct of the highest tiers of major state institutions, which form the pillars of a modern and democratic government, became widely suspect. Political manipulation put unqualified people, and even frauds, in the highest positions in the judiciary; and erratic decisions, to put it charitably, were given from the highest judicial bodies.

The Public Service Commission (PSC) had, traditionally, a reputation for screening and recruiting the servants of the republic with objectivity and fairness. Allegations were rampant lately

about corruption in conducting examinations and selecting candidates by the PSC.

The norms for recruitment, placement and promotion in the Civil Service were replaced by the political loyalty test, thus allowing unlimited tolerance of incompetence and dishonesty. The law-enforcing agencies became tools for partisan ends.

The much-heralded Anti-Corruption Commission sat idle for over two years; it is difficult to argue that this was not by design. Political loyalty became the criterion for appointments at all levels in public universities, which destroyed conditions for scholarly pursuits. Private universities were allowed to be established, and to function without enforcement of government's own rules and quality criteria.

The responsibility for the state of affairs described weighs heavily on the coalition regime that had ruled for the last five years. But there is plenty of blame to go around. Since the memorable popular uprising of 1990 that toppled the decade-and-half-long authoritarian rule and restored parliamentary democracy, it has been downhill for democracy ever since.

Dynastic leadership, reinforced

by a tendency to glorify personalities, hampered the growth and inculcation of a democratic culture in the major political parties. Political parties failed to develop and follow a democratic process for electing leaders at all levels, be transparent about funding sources, give a say to the constituencies in selecting parliamentary candidates, and foster new and younger leadership. They have not found it necessary to live by their election pledges, or give an explanation for failing to fulfill the promises.

Key measures for building the democratic polity, which actually were adopted as election pledges by the major parties, remained unfulfilled for 15 years in the watch of both major political coalitions in power.

Cases in point -- separation of judiciary from the executive, an effective Election Commission, an independent and functioning Anti-Corruption Commission, adoption of freedom of information laws, guaranteeing independence of the public media, ensuring neutrality of the law-enforcing agencies and the civil administration, direct and substantial representation of women in the parliament, establishing effective local government structures, and protecting educa-



tional institutions from partisan politics.

The present caretaker government has managed to do more on some of these items in weeks than what political regimes did in 15 years.

An emergency regime, by definition, cannot continue indefinitely. It must have an exit strategy, and the public has the right to be taken into confidence about the exit plan. The political parties also have the right to ask about the timetable for

restarting the democratic process which has been put on hold.

By the same token, the public has the right to demand from the political parties, especially those who aspire to take the helm of the government, to know about their plans and programs for reforming and cleansing themselves, and their timetable for accomplishing these changes.

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political parties must provide the roadmap for new politics that would nurture democracy in the country and in their own affairs.

This includes the new party that Dr. Yunus plans to lead.

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Time to make the change

Now is the time to struggle for a proper cause, and enjoy the economic freedom of our nation. We should try to find our own solutions, rather than waiting for the government to solve it for us. This should be applicable for all of us -- as professionals, as entrepreneurs, as businesses, as citizens. And we should remember that the solutions lie in innovations.

RUBAIYATH SARWAR

IN economics comparative disadvantages are thought to be roots for innovation and counters for those who are comparatively in advantageous positions. And champions, may it be a company, may it be a country, or may it be professionals, don't get engaged in dead-lock trying to establish what they don't have.

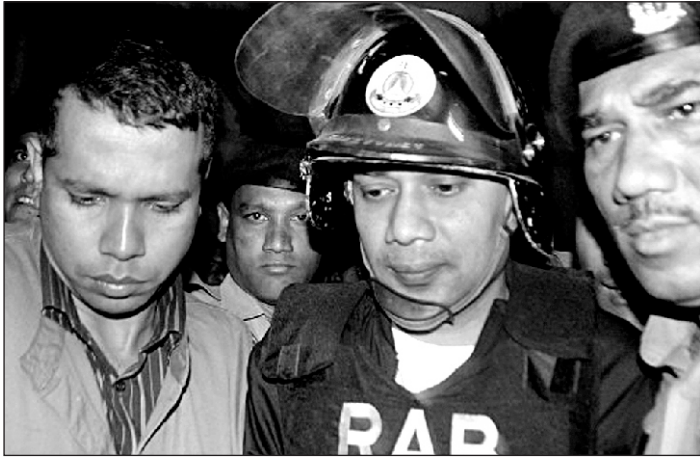
They search for alternatives, and because of their disadvantage they find a solution that is least expected by the competition enjoying a comparative advantage. The jinx is broke.

Unfortunately, this is not the case for Bangladesh. We spend too much time trying to establish the fact that our politics is so bad that the economy will never be able to flourish.

Our leaders are so corrupt that our politics can never be purified. And yet, we will vote for the same leaders and will justify our votes by saying: "I have voted for the comparatively better one (which is in fact, always comparatively better for me)." Do I see a change in this now?

It is true that the caretaker government is trying to clean the political system as much as it can. Generally, the people are happy to see the names of the arrestees, to have roads free of hawkers and illegal structures, to have the police working for the people.

But it is also true that millions are now unemployed. My fear is that, if we are to create a proper framework



for putting the rules into practice, it might act as a brewing hurricane.

This would be disastrous for the country once the emergency is lifted and the country is ruled by the same parties.

Today, what we see is an attempt to forcibly erase all the dark spots and make those white. But we should remember that once we are coercive we have to remain coercive for a long time, and make the unruly mob get habituated to following the laws and forget what it meant to be unlawful.

And here is the catch -- how long shall we be sustained by the caretaker government? Already, different stakeholders are pushing for election.

To my mind, democracy will not be relevant any more for at least one year, thus an election will be futile and will ruin whatever good has been achieved. There should be no

looking back.

However, one encouraging result of this is the fact that we have been able to create a sense of optimism amongst the people and amongst the international community. The disadvantage has now become an advantage for at least a short period.

This is the right time for us to unite the nation for one cause -- development. We need to create a vision for the country, develop economic development plans that will promote Bangladesh as a strong business entity in global trade.

Our strength lies in human resources. We need policies to capitalize on our human resource. As an industrial competitiveness analyst, I have travelled across South-East Asia to study how we can promote exports from Bangladesh against strong competition from the likes of China and

Vietnam.

The negotiations were always constrained due to the fact that our port is not fit for international trade, and because we do not have a raw materials import policy, which is conducive to competitive production cost.

The print media has already written a lot about this issue. However, political governments are usually constrained because they have to listen to those who finance their political operations.

Moreover, political governments have to consider short-term employment for many against long-term sustainability or growth. Policies are framed to support that. This should be the right time to change and create a proper economic development framework.

Meanwhile, the media should play an active role in showing how our neighbours, and countries like Vietnam, are changing rapidly. This should open our eyes. We should know that for a long-term economic sustainability, we must endure short-term struggles -- and that, too, for no more than a decade.

We have waited 36 years, and struggled due to shortsighted and vicious political doctrines. Now is the time to struggle for a proper cause, and enjoy the economic freedom of our nation.

We should try to find our own solutions, rather than waiting for the government to solve it for us. This should be applicable for all of us -- as professionals, as entrepreneurs, as businesses, as citizens. And we should remember that the solutions lie in innovations.

Rubaiyath Sarwar is a Business Consultant, Swisscontact Catalyst.

The Kosovo quandary

But the dilemma with the western capitals is that, even if they win the battle at the UN Security Council, Moscow may use the autonomy of Kosovo as a pretext to push independence for Kremlin-sponsored separatists in the former Soviet republics of Georgia and Moldova -- the so-called "frozen conflicts."

IMRAN KHALID

IF the countries of the Contact Group show goodwill, we are less than half a step from a lasting solution and historical agreement between Serbs and Albanians," said Vuk Draskovic, Serbian foreign minister, hours after the UN talks on the status of the ethnic Albanian-dominated province Kosovo ended without a solution in Vienna on March 2.

If viewed against the extremely divergent stances of the two sides on the subject, this statement is no more than loud wishful thinking.

The reality is that all the sides have lost hope about any rapprochement at this point of time. The demise of the Cold War, in addition to making huge social, cultural, economic and political changes, has also drastically affected the geography of Europe -- particularly the eastern part.

The emergence of new states on the basis of ethnic complexion is not a new phenomenon in Eastern Europe, but it has found new impetus in the post-Cold War era, which is now witnessing unwinding of the states created in the wake of World War II.

Kosovo is a lucid example of this trend. With a population of about 2 million, which is divided between 90 percent ethnic Albanians and 10 percent Serbs, Kosovo, formerly part of Yugoslavia, has witnessed an intense war between the two

sides, killing several thousand people, mostly on the Albanian side.

Entire families were brutally massacred. Many men are still missing. It became the cause of Nato's first "humanitarian" war in 1999.

Nato put the brakes on the infighting, which resulted in the death of 10,000 Albanians and drove out almost 1 million in two years, with a 78-day bombing campaign.

Kosovo is being administered by the United Nations, and protected by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization since then. Last year, after six years of political uncertainty, the UN initiated the process of reconciliation between the ethnic Albanians and the Serbs on the future status of Kosovo. Marti Ahtisaari, the UN mediator, has been very active about this for quite some time. He mediated months of fruitless Serbian talks in 2006 before unveiling his plan in February.

It was Mr. Ahtisaari, who enticed the two sides to sit at the negotiating table to discuss the new UN plan. From February 21 to March 02, the two sides remained busy in intense rounds of talks -- clause by clause -- on various aspects of the plan that practically paves the way for Kosovo's independence without mentioning this word in the draft.

Factually speaking, from the very outset, the negotiations were

not expected to yield any concrete results. Ahtisaari's proposal, if implemented in its current form, would give Kosovo internationally supervised self-rule and the trappings of statehood, including a flag, anthem, army and constitution. This means the practical separation of Kosovo from Serbia.

Obviously, the Serb leadership is not ready to listen to this kind of proposal, that literally erodes their territory -- they are referring to it as chopping of Serbia's belly.

So, their recalcitrance is a predictable element. On the other hand, for the last seven years, Serbia has not had any shred of authority over Kosovo -- a factor that has compelled the Serbs to at least accept the "full autonomy" of the Albanians as a compromise deal.

But the problem is that Serbia's "one country, two systems" formula is far less than what is being expected by the Albanians, who are not ready to accept anything less than complete independence and, therefore, are even protesting against Mr. Ahtisaari's proposal of "virtual independence."

Now, after the failure of the last-resort talks in Vienna, Ahtisaari is expected to again sit down with the two sides as well, as Nato and EU representatives, on March 10, before sending his proposal for the UN Security Council approval by the end of this month.

From a practical perspective, the Vienna talks were more of a

formality, to ask the two sides to "see and negotiate" before dispatching the proposal to the UN Security Council.

With both sides still poles apart, the probability of an imposed solution has increased, along with the chances of a showdown at the UN Security Council between the United States, which supports Kosovo independence, and Russia, an historic Serbian ally with veto power.

In 1999, when the NATO started its air strikes against Serbia, Moscow tried to mediate but then, weakened by domestic political turmoil and economic crisis, backed away from having a head-on collision.

However, the situation is quite different in 2007, with a buoyant Putin who has adopted an increasingly assertive tone.

Moscow has been stubbornly insisting that no plan would be acceptable until Serbia gave its agreement. But the dilemma with the western capitals is that, even if they win the battle at the UN Security Council, Moscow may use the autonomy of Kosovo as a pretext to push independence for Kremlin-sponsored separatists in the former Soviet republics of Georgia and Moldova -- the so-called "frozen conflicts."

Apparently, despite the formal, unavoidable hiccups, Kosovo is all set to get some sort of autonomy. But this autonomy has the potential to ignite new tensions in the global arena over the "frozen conflicts."

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Member of the axis of evil no more

The agreement, however, offers no timetable for North Korea to give up its weapons. Observers suggest it might take up to 10 years for that to happen. Former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage raised the possibility of the US having to "sit down with Japan and prepare for the possibility that North Korea will remain in possession of a certain number of nuclear weapons even as the (Korean) peninsula comes slowly together for some sort of unification."

GAVAN MCCORMACK

AFTER 15 years of sporadic negotiations and crises, an agreement reached in Beijing on February 13, 2007, holds the promise of a new security and political order in Northeast Asia.

North Korea is prepared to shut and seal its reactor, a first step toward its permanent "disablement;" allow the return of International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors; and submit, after 60 days, a detailed inventory of the nuclear weapons and facilities to be "abandoned."

In return, the other parties will grant it a million tons of heavy oil, 50,000 tons immediately, the US and Japan will open talks aimed at normalizing diplomatic relations

and the US will "begin the process" of removing the designation as a state sponsor of terrorism and "advance the process" of terminating its Trading with the Enemy Act application.

The parties will "take positive steps to increase mutual trust" and to "negotiate a permanent peace regime on the Korean peninsula." If this happens, peace and cooperation will radiate from the very peninsula that in the 20th century was one of the most violently contested and militarized spots on earth.

For South Korea in particular, the agreement holds dramatic possibilities: South-North ministerial talks are already resuming in Pyongyang; a summit is a strong possibility and there is talk in Seoul of a Marshall Plan program to revive the Northern economy and

of the early resumption of the train link between the two nations after a 57-year closure.

The long-term prospect is for a united, denuclearized and substantially demilitarized Korea, playing a prominent, perhaps the core role, in the construction of a future Northeast Asian Community.

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tion."

Only by gradually building the sort of regional community and new security regime in which North Korea would accept that it had no further need of nuclear weapons could there be any assurance of abolition. Having survived for so long against all odds as a secretive, highly mobilized, authoritarian, crisis system, normalization will present North Korea peculiar problems.

The Catch 22 for North Korean leader Kim Jong Il: Only by giving up his weapons can he gain security and escape from isolation. To do that requires a shift from military to civilian priorities, as well as a response to popular demands for improved living conditions and civil liberties. That shift could undermine the system on which his power and prestige rests.

Three issues must be resolved for the agreement to proceed:

Highly enriched uranium (HEU)

US allegations of a North Korean HEU-based weapons program in 2002 led to the present crisis. In 1998 North Korea probably purchased 20 centrifuges from A.Q.

Khan of Pakistan.

However, enriching of uranium to weapons grade requires a level of precision almost certainly beyond North Korea's capacity. Immediately after the Beijing agreement, Pyongyang expressed readiness to address US suspicions on this front, which suggests that this issue might be negotiable.

Two weeks after Beijing, a senior government analyst told US Congress that the intelligence community was now "uncertain" about the state of any North Korean HEU program, leaving open the possibility that an Iraqi-style political manipulation of intelligence had contributed to the 2002 crisis. Pyongyang expressed readiness to address US concerns, and the issue suddenly seemed negotiable.

Banco Delta Asia (BDA)

The most recent North Korean standoff with the US arose primarily not from nuclear matters but from the US allegation of a counterfeit operation, partly orchestrated through the BDA in Macao.

It stretches the imagination to think North Korea could apply such sophisticated technology to strike

a blow at the US Treasury, in small quantities, especially when North Korea cannot print its own currency.

The mystery remains, but when Christopher Hill, the chief US delegate, announced in Beijing that the matter would be resolved "within 30 days," that could only mean that it had already been settled.

Light water reactor (LWR)

Kim's father and North Korea's former leader, Kim Il Sung, set his heart on power generation by means of light water reactors as the quintessential, ultra-modern technology, even though it lacks military application; the LWR is close to holy writ in Pyongyang as a result.

For the Bush administration, on the other hand, it is the epitome of the "failed" policies of the Clinton administration. Paradoxically, because the crucial consideration with the LWR is not military, this may be the most difficult issue to resolve.

Japan, not commonly thought of as a core country in the Beijing negotiation process, may express the most shock over the agreement

-- comparable to the "Nixon shocks" over US engagement with China more than three decades ago.

Prime Minister Abe owes his rise to political power in Japan in large part to his skill in manipulating anti-North Korea sentiment over the issue of abductions of Japanese citizens during the 1970s and 1980s.

He cannot easily reverse himself now. Domestic political considerations trump international ones, and the abductions are framed as a North Korean crime against Japan rather than a universal human-rights offense.

Since Bush's policy shift in Beijing requires Japan to negotiate normalization, Abe's "containment policy," as the Asahi Shimbun news report put it on February 15, "falls apart."

Unquestioning support to Washington has long been the fundamental tenet of the Japanese state. But for normalization with North Korea to proceed, Japan will have to rethink its position on both North Korea and the US.

Nobody in Japan is ready for the sort of "sitting down" indicated by

Armitage, so confusion and anger, and perhaps political instability, can be expected.

It remains to be seen whether North Korea, the US and Japan, can neutralize their hard-line domestic opposition and build trust in sufficient measure to outweigh decades of hostility.

The Beijing agreement constitutes a pre-dawn light in the darkness, heralding a possible new multipolar and post-US hegemonic order in Northeast Asia, with the Six-Party conference format institutionalized in due course as a body for addressing common problems of security, environment, food and energy, the precursor of a future regional community.

It is hard to imagine anything with greater capacity to transform the regional and global system than the peaceful settlement of the many problems addressed in Beijing in February 2007.

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