

Drive against corruption

Should be focused leaving no room for ambiguity

WE not only endorse but also appreciate the main thrust and objective of the caretaker government's drive against corruption, which has already shaken some seemingly unassailable 'fortresses' of corruption. Who would have thought that the immediate past prime minister's sons would be arrested for their alleged involvement in corrupt practices? The drive has cut across party lines and reached the very top of the political hierarchy. One thing is pretty clear: no political party would have been able to take such a bold step to combat corruption.

From the same point of view of wanting the drive to succeed, we would like to point out that the charges that are being brought against the arrestees are not always the most credible. The latest case in point is the arrest of BNP leader Moudud Ahmed for his possession of liquor that was allegedly imported without paying the duty. Another development that is noteworthy is that the Law Adviser himself termed the extortion case against one-time prime minister Sheikh Hasina as being 'peculiar'. There shouldn't be any ambiguity in the charges being pressed.

Of course there is little doubt that those who are corrupt in the public eye have been netted, regardless of their political affiliations. But after they have spent more than a month in jail, we feel constrained to say that people may have questions about the speed and seriousness with which most of the cases are being handled. Why can't the government reveal the full extent of the crimes allegedly committed by the detained politicians? Without this kind of clarity in the actions of the government, doubts may creep in about the credibility of the process.

While we are supportive of the general drive against corruption, we would like to raise two points here. First, in an expanding economy there are small and medium enterprises which sometimes do things that by technical interpretations may fall on the wrong side of the law. Their such omissions and commissions may be seen from a different angle of flexibility. Secondly, there is a widespread lack of awareness, especially of income tax laws; this should also be shown some sensitivity.

Militants regrouping?

Crush the networks once and for all

WE are heartened by the success of the law enforcing agencies in smoking out militants from different parts of the country. But the question is why they are still springing out from different directions?

The government has, of course, made it clear that it meant business when it came to apprehending those who took the liberty to misinterpret and misuse religion to fulfill their obscurantist objectives. Hopefully, the ongoing drive to keep the misguided young people on the chase would help in the long run in obliterating their networks now seemingly spread all across the country.

The factor of religious extremism found a new dimension during the rule of the 4-party alliance government when many of the former lawmakers allegedly had directly and indirectly provided support to some of the groups, particularly JMB and Harkatul Islam. It was JMB that had flourished under the patronage of the powerful godfathers and became blatantly reckless to say the minimum. It is good to note that the government is also looking into the allegations of involvement of the former lawmakers in the rise of the militant groups.

It seems the threat of this dangerously armed outfit has not been totally neutralised with the hanging of their six top leaders. The second rung leaders are still at large and they are audacious enough to regroup at various secret hideouts and intimidate people with threatening letters. It is a cause for concern that the militants continue to recruit and train young people, distribute books and leaflets containing messages of 'jihad' with renewed vigour and zeal.

We feel the added concern is the surfacing of some old groups of militants across the country under various new names and labels. This is a new tactic the law enforcing agencies must try to deal with an iron hand. To achieve desired results, law enforcers will have to track down the mentors, funding sources and training grounds to crush the networks once and for all. It is an ongoing effort but, nevertheless, it cannot go on ad infinitum. The sooner it is done the better.

The speculations galore



M ABDUL HAFIZ

UNDER a state of emergency and supported by the military, the present interim government installed on January 12 has fared rather well, as was reflected in the address to the nation by Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed on expiry of the first three months of his assumption of the office of chief adviser.

Also, we know that order and discipline have now been restored in the country, a wobbly economy

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put back on track and reforms initiated on multiple fronts. The perpetrators of macro-corruption, criminalisation and terror tactics in politics, and myriad other evil practices, have been rounded up and brought before the law. No political dispensation would have been able to do it, for obvious reasons, and the present government justifiably received widespread public support and applause on this count.

Indeed, the credit goes to the interim government for its hunky-dory performance, which could still be better but for perfidious politics pursued during the preceding

years. There are roadblocks at almost every step, and going forward will be painfully slow. Even if the public is generous enough to give the time needed by the government for removing the debris of the past, there are demands for a time-frame for the election of the ninth parliament, as well as for limited political activity.

Understandably, as the government couldn't immediately do it for undisclosed reasons, the inability resulted in wild speculation, and even scepticism among the political class. It is to the credit of the CA, who intuitively sensed the impatience, that he put it to rest by

removing the shroud of ambivalence that surrounded the issue of election. The CA has, in unequivocal terms, assured that it would be held before the year 2008 was out.

Speculation is rife about the future political order, existing political parties and their leadership. The recent developments with regard to the top leadership of those parties sparked a new spate of debate in political circles. Even private conversations revolve around the same topic.

In recent times, there have been numerous accusations against politics and politicians. This is not without reason. In the wake of

PERSPECTIVES

A nation in crisis



IKRAM SEHGAL
writes from Karachi

NAEEM Bokhari's open letter to the chief justice of the Supreme Court of Pakistan was appalling for several reasons. Firstly, it tarnished the image of a man for whom one has great respect, Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, and secondly, it came from the pen of another man for whom one has great respect.

If the facts stated therein are true, then the letter needed to be written; it should not have been made public. "Excesses" as per Naeem's letter are commonplace in Pakistan, bringing it to the public domain demeans an office one should always hold sacred, as much as anything can be held sacred in Pakistan.

Triggering an unfortunate sequence of events, which for a time spun out of control, the letter had a backlash of sorts. It enhanced the stature of the man, which the letter sought to demean, and tarnished the image of the letter writer, bringing him down many rungs from the pedestal he rightly should be on. Naeem Bokhari has class, he is no ordinary being, and the letter has made him look like us ordinary mortals.

When senior judges of the higher courts are sitting in judgment on

their brother colleague, one should not comment, both justice and common sense will certainly prevail. Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry's period as chief justice was exciting because of his activist role in pursuing cases of public consequence in a fair and positive manner.

Most impressive in raising the stature of the Bench, the Honourable CJ's integrity and character have never been questioned. The people of Pakistan badly need justice to be exercised, the only way was a forced "trickle-down" effect from the Supreme Court to the Provincial High Courts and downwards. Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry was making it happen by example, that is a solid public perception.

The CJ's removal was very badly handled, somehow it seems to be an off-the-cuff knee-jerk reaction to his refusing to roll over and play dead! Elements in the government were raring to have a go at him, their motives coinciding with the apprehensions (or misapprehensions) of the president about his doffing of the uniform. Stoked with a vengeance, it resulted in a no-win situation.

AS I SEE IT

The CJ will probably win the battle to clear his name, he could end up losing the war. He can resume his office as the CJ but, as a man of conscience, can he continue to do so without tarring permanently as political the office of the chief justice of the Supreme Court? As for Musharraf, paraphrasing Mark Twain's reaction when he was told about news of his death being circulated, "the rumours of Musharraf's departure are greatly exaggerated." This man is at his best when he is in a corne. This soldier may have been politically wounded, but it is when he is seemingly down when he can be quite lethal.

The president's advisors game-planned that when the CJ would be confronted with his "misdoings" he would tamely resign. His stubbornness scrambled the script. The president would have been better served if saner legal counsels of the government had reviewed the subsequent reference.

Thereafter, what happened can simply be described as abhorrent and shocking, acknowledged by everyone except the likes of the federal minister for information; Durrani and credibility do not go together. To retain a shred of credibility, the government should put their miserable "mouthpiece" out of his misery.

Durrani's patent and blatant falsehoods on primetime TV only added fuel to the fire, compounding the administration's gaffes till better sense prevailed and the CJ was sent "on forced leave" pending adjudication by the SJC. The CJ's humiliation notwithstanding, the country's humiliation could have been avoided by a less "gung-ho" attitude.

This was an incident wanting to happen, the result of an attitude of

being above the rule of law inculcated over the years. One of the most decorated brigadiers of this army, Brig (Retd) Mohammad Taj, SJ & Bar, was beaten up (for whatever reason), and the minions who did that walked off with what amounted to mere slaps on the wrist.

The president did apologize to Brig Taj over telephone, but what about those up the line who ordered the outrage? In the absence of accountability thereof, a bigger outrage was waiting to happen. In the CJ's case, some tried to be "more loyal than the king," a la Henry II and Becket, "who will rid me of this meddling priest?"

Pervez Musharraf has unnecessarily been put under pressure domestically when he least needed it. The western perception is that his heart (and that of his army) is not fully behind anti-Qaeda/anti-Taliban operations in Pakistan, particularly in South Waziristan.

Now everyone and his uncle is predicting Musharraf's imminent downfall on the CJ issue. To add grist to the mill, the Nab Cell pursuing the corruption cases against

military and quasi-military rules in the country pseudo politicians infiltrated the ranks of genuine politicians, bringing bad name to politics. Many of them were amoral and opportunistic.

There is nothing like absolutely good or bad in any field. Even the great statesmen in history are not without their share of failure and stigma. The interim government has already undertaken draconian anti-corruption steps, and many have been caught in its dragnet.

Let them face the verdict of the law of the land. Let the ill-gotten wealth and money laundered away by political thugs be retrieved and utilised in a constructive and philanthropic ways, as suggested by the army chief in one of his addressees.

If we have to revert back to democracy, political parties are important institutions. But they do not grow overnight. Even if stigmatised now, the Awami League

spearheaded the country's fight for independence and has its own symbolic value.

The BNP also served the cause of democracy -- in spite of its enormous failures. Yet, there can be a third force. A new political platform of "clean" people, but not at the cost of the existing political parties, as is rumoured.

The existing politics ought not be tampered with. Because that will only breed a bunch of new opportunists, beneficiaries of a new situation, and bandwagonists. They will certainly not serve the noble purpose envisioned by the reformists.

What is, however, imperative is that the political parties should, on their own, introduce a measure of democracy within themselves. It is immaterial where Sheikh Hasina or Begum Zia find their place in that process.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

demeaned us as a nation. Unfortunately, despite the heat of the moment, the CJ addressed the Rawalpindi Bar Council.

While it is very much right to do so, and he did scrupulously avoid mention of his personal predicament, the fact is that in the very charged political environment prevailing, a very politically charged crowd of lawyers took him in a procession to the location.

The theme of the meeting was anti-government, by his presence the CJ took sides. Unfortunately, his person has thus become political, and made the CJ's locus standi controversial. The CJ will probably win the battle to clear his name, he could end up losing the war.

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Musharraf is not going anywhere, at least not yet! Neither is ShaukatAziz.

Face-to-face meeting with Sheikh Hasina in Washington DC

The Awami League leader is very hopeful that Bangladesh will again chart the course of democracy. She thinks that there is no substitute for democracy for the good of the common people. The role played by United Nations and the developed western nations, to make democracy a norm all over the world, was also touched upon by her.

A.H. JAFFOR ULLAH

I was invited to meet Sheikh Hasina on the evening of April 13, in Falls Church, Virginia (a suburb of Washington DC). The full account of my conversation with her will be completed very soon. This write-up will only highlight the gist of the informal talk she presented before a select few.

As most readers know, Bangladesh is going through a very uncertain and rough time and, at this time, the prospect for democracy looks very bleak after the statements and unbridled remarks by Gen. Moen and law adviser, Mainul Hossain.

In her talk with BBC last week she characterized the present military-backed interim government as uncon-

stitutional and illegal. In retaliation, two cases were filed, one for extortion and the other one for murder of some protestors in October 2006.

The president of Awami League, who is now visiting America to be with her daughter, who is pregnant, and son, who is blessed with a newborn, was planning to head back home to face the charges. One of the advisers of the interim government had called her, and urged her to complete the trip and not return immediately. She acquiesced to the request from the adviser.

Sheikh Hasina looked relaxed, and she knows the direction in which the political wind is blowing in Bangladesh. She is very confident that the general masses are with her. She is also optimistic that the people of Bangladesh know

what is good for them.

Hasina reiterated that her party had always taken principled stands and worked for the good of the masses, and that she was willing to fight for the democratic rights of the people.

While she is optimistic about the future election -- a fair and free one -- which the interim government wants to hold in 18 months time, she is deeply saddened by the mischaracterization of her party by some as being another greedy and corrupt political organization.

She lamented that a whisper campaign has been initiated to malign her party. She praised the mayors of Chittagong and Sylhet, labelling them as honest and hardworking representatives of the people who helped them in

the time of need. But they were arrested, and no charges have so far been levied against them.

Sheikh Hasina is very much looking forward to returning to Bangladesh, and these charges cannot dampen her love for motherland and the people. Last night, she reminisced about the things that she did for the betterment of the people in the villages.

I found that she has an amazing fixation about the past, and the common people of Bangladesh. Her face was beaming with joy when she described how the actions she took as the PM made it possible to bring more acreage under agriculture, and to realize the dream of achieving self-sufficiency in food.

Contrary to what others may think, Sheikh Hasina is a fearless political leader, and it shows in her deportment. She is least disturbed by the new developments in Dhaka, concerning the lodging of two very serious cases against her. Against this dire backdrop, she showed her mettle for facing the new reality of the ever-changing political

landscape in Bangladesh. She wished she were there now.

About the dynastical nature of Bangladesh politics, she is very upset about such accusatory characterization by some. She added that she never wanted to be the president of Awami League, rather it was thrust upon her after the brutal murder of her father, mother, and brothers in August 1975.

She was comparing her style of governance during 1996-2001 with the one that lasted five full years and ended in October 2006. She characterized her government as being pro-people and developmentally oriented. She emphasized that she always looked for the betterment of very poor people living in the hinterlands of Bangladesh.

She said that nothing was more joyous to her than seeing people in the rural areas having two square meals a day, sending their children to nearby schools, etc. The thought of making easy money through offering energy contract to multinationals was never in her mind.

She pointed out that her daughter

works in Florida as a child psychologist, and has to drive from school to school to make a meager living, and that her son and daughter-in-law both have to work to maintain a house in suburban Washington DC.

She added that if she had made illegal money, how is it that her daughter and son have to work like other Americans to maintain their families? She sarcastically said: "Do people who have lots of money work so hard, like ordinary people?"

The Awami League leader is very hopeful that Bangladesh will again chart the course of democracy. She thinks that there is no substitute for democracy for the good of the common people. The role played by United Nations and the developed western nations, to make democracy a norm all over the world, was also touched upon by her.

Dr. A.H. Jaffor Ullah, a researcher and columnist, writes from New Orleans, USA.

IN FRONT OF THE BOX

No smile this time

PAUL MASON

THERE will be much talk of the "luck of the Irish" in papers around the world today -- but that cliché is out of place here. There was no providence involved in how Ireland went about dismantling Bangladesh. The Irish were well prepared, took calculated risks, kept their nerve, and outplayed the Tigers for a 74 run win. For the first time in this World Cup, I was disappointed by Bangladesh.

The Tigers may have been well beaten in the past few weeks by Sri Lanka, Australia and New Zealand -- no shame there, after all, these are the confirmed semi-finalists. But this loss really stung. Here was a good chance for the Tigers to put some real distance between themselves and the ICC Associates, and build on their heroics against India and South Africa. Instead they capitulated, and wiped the smile off my face.

Bangladesh was thrown off from the

start by Johnston's brave decision to bat first on a tricky wicket -- a first taste of some inspired captaincy. He wasn't about to let Bangladesh's spinners choke his batsmen later in the day when conditions would suit them.

That he clean-bowled his opposite number to wrap up the game summarised Johnston's day. He led from the front with both the bat and ball, and his bowling changes did not let the tempo drop -- bringing about some vital wickets. His "funky chicken" wasn't

bad either.

243 was a strong total from Ireland, helped by some sloppy fielding, and presented a daunting task considering that the highest score chased down in the tournament so far is 248. But we know that Bangladesh have both the talent and depth to maintain a competitive scoring rate over an innings if they stick to their plan of keeping wickets in hand for the final push.

However, it wasn't to be -- and once again the batsmen were undone by a lack of

composure. The manner in which the Tigers went about their batting felt more like a 20-20 match -- they certainly seemed in some sort of hurry.

No fan of cricket would want to see the natural flair of the Bangladesh stroke makers unnecessarily stifled, but on the other hand, the Tigers' batsmen need to develop a greater sense of awareness -- there is no need to chase the big shots when the situation doesn't require it.

Having been restricted by some

tight bowling from Langford-Smith, the opening batsmen were quick to lose their patience, and their approach set the tone for the rest of the innings. I started getting nervous when Tamim began flashing wildly at balls that were well wide of his off stump. His dismissal -- bowled dancing down the wicket chasing a consecutive boundary typified the Bangladesh effort.

As inspired as the Irish captain looked, Bashir was out of sorts -- especially

running between the wickets. Bashir has not had a good tournament with the bat, and you can sense a loss in confidence from Bangladesh's most senior batsman. His hesitation this time putting unnecessary pressure on Ashraf -- and once the danger-man went so did Bangladesh's chances. Bashir did his best to eke out an innings, but it was never going to be enough. Irish eyes were certainly smiling. (Here the cliché fits.)

This tournament has demonstrated that

the Tigers have the talent to compete with the best. But it has also underlined a serious lack of consistency that is frustrating for their fans.

Their next game against the West Indies might not have any bearing on the outcome of this World Cup, but Bangladesh will want to make a good fist of it, and fly home on a high. Prior to this match they were on course for a rapturous welcome on arrival at Zia International, and now owe it to themselves to collect.

