

Caretaker government should clear the clouds

NAZRUL ISLAM

As the current interim administration steps into the fourth month of its assumption of office, it seems that it is getting more entangled with contentious issues relating to politics. With the passage of time, and the recent overt views of the army chief, political observers have started to believe that the current caretaker government is going to take the shape of the Pakistani type of government of General Musharraf.

The apparently cool political arena suddenly heated up with the filing of an extortion case against Awami League president Sheikh Hasina. The situation turned more complicated when police submitted charge-sheets implicating Hasina and some top leaders of 14-party in the Paltan killing case.

Although the heat could not spread openly due to the ban on politics, its warmth can be felt while talking to general people and political leaders. Even the country's newspapers and the foreign media could send out a portion of the turmoil following the latest developments. There is a general view that all these happened after a green signal by the government, or the powers behind the government.

There is no doubt that people in



general have supported the current government's move against corruption, and its other steps. But who are these general people? Are they apolitical? Do they have no political identity?

The Bangladeshi people are highly political. From poor farm-labourers to high civil bureaucrats, all are political elements. Various

surveys show that more than 80 percent of the people are supporters of major political parties. Historically, Bangladeshi youths are politically conscious.

During the British era, it was the then Bengal where most of the revolutionary movements had taken place. It was the Bengali youths who first embraced martyr-

dom for the freedom of their country.

Again, after independence of Pakistan, the Bengali youths embraced martyrdom for the cause of their mother tongue. It is a unique example in modern history that people sacrificed their lives for protecting their mother tongue.

Then see the developments in

the fifties and sixties. Bengalis waged an almost non-stop movement during the 23 years of the Pakistani regime, and finally fought an uneven war with one of the elite forces in the world -- the Pakistani armed forces -- and came out victorious.

All this could happen as the people of this deltaic region are very sensitive about their rights. They have an indomitable nature by birth, as they have to survive fighting various odds, including natural calamities like floods, cyclones, tornadoes, drought etc. That is why we could see recent incidents like Kansat or Phulbari, where a score of people died to protect their rights.

So, those who are supporting the government are obviously political elements -- supporters of political parties. If the government wants to accomplish its tasks, it must take the people, i.e. certain political parties, into confidence.

I think it was getting the backing from a big political party like Awami League, which openly supported most of the initiatives of the government, especially the anti-corruption drive, despite seeing some of its top-ranking leaders being put behind bars.

But the bid to implicate the Awami League president in any case, aimed at keeping her out of

politics or the country, might enrage the largest and the oldest political party in the country.

And if Awami League withdraws its support, it would be very difficult for the government to accomplish the ongoing reform tasks smoothly, even under the cover of the state of emergency. The move might turn into a barrier for the government in the long run.

And the very notion of a section of people -- that all politicians are thieves -- is also not acceptable. In fact, human beings are basically dishonest. It would not be possible to find a single human being, except the infant and the insane, in the world who did not commit any wrongdoing in his/her lifetime. We

would have to take into consideration the gravity and magnitude of the dishonesty. So, it is unwise to malign the politicians alone as a whole.

Rather, it was the civil and military bureaucrats who implanted and spread corruption among the politicians and other sections of the society during the late 70s and 80s. The seeds of corruption sown in the late 70s and 80s were nurtured in the 90s, and after 2000 it turned into a full-grown tree.

It was the public servants and business people who were the beneficiaries of corruption. None of us -- civil society members, lawyers

or professionals -- can evade our responsibility in pushing the country to its present dismal state.

There are widespread rumours that the government wants to patronise a new political party, dismantling the established ones, to hand over power to a suitable time. As part of this process, critics say, the government has taken the step to implicate the chief of a party so that she could not return home from abroad, and to send the other one into exile.

But, if the government wants to follow the example of Pakistan, where General Musharraf sent the chiefs of the two major parties into exile a decade back, it might not work here.

The Bengali mores are very different from the Pakistanis'. Pakistanis never fought for democracy; rather they love to be ruled by the military. On the contrary, Bengalis always fought for democracy. The government should clarify its position in this regard. I think that the revered persons who are running the affairs of the state will not step into such a trap if anybody lays it in their way.

There is no denying the fact that, over the years, the country has been thrown into a state of anarchy. The majority of the people support the ongoing measures

to bring back rule of law in the country. The steps that the government has taken to bring the country back on track should continue. We don't want the ongoing reform programs to stop halfway because of unnecessary obstacles. A democratic government is the final aspiration of the people.

The onus is on the current caretaker government, to hand over power to a government elected through a free, fair and credible election. We know that it will require considerable time to make preparations for the task. But it must not be too long, so that people cannot say that the administration is adopting a dillydallying tactic to deceive the people.

The political leadership, who are also losing patience, should also demonstrate their fortitude by helping to cleanse the country, as well as their respective parties, if they believe in democracy and good governance.

After all, people believe that it is the political parties who are responsible for all the ills of the country. They would also have to take a vow to ensure good governance and transparency in running the country if voted to power.

Nazrul Islam is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Debate over democracy

ZIAUDDIN CHOWDHURY

SIR Winston Churchill once famously observed: "Many forms of government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." We need to ponder on this celebrated statement now that our country is at a political crossroads, and we have new debates on the "type" of democracy suited to our needs.

It is worthwhile, at this juncture, to recall how many times in the past we misdirected our accusations and threw away institutions built over time, because of the misdeeds of a section of the people who abused these institutions. It takes only a day to demolish edifices that took years to build.

Our first strike at parliamentary democracy occurred at the infancy of our nation, in 1975, ironically at the hands of the person who gave it to us in the first place. Confronted with a fast deteriorating economy, rampant corruption, and collapse of law and order, our leader amended the constitution to allow for a presidential system of government, and one-party rule with a rump parliament.

Sad to say, this action came from the leader who had declared only two years before that he believed in "(parliamentary

democracy, supremacy of the will of the people; government by the consent of the governed." So disenchanted was he with his own parliament, and distrustful of its members, that he readily threw away three years of hard work that went towards building a constitution that had made preservation of civil liberties its top-most priority.

There were two catastrophic fallouts from this highly flawed political action. First was the assassination of the father of the nation by a group of disgruntled military officers, and second was the sequence of military coups and counter-coups that ultimately brought to power General Ziaur Rahman, and imposition of Martial Law. Parliamentary democracy went south.

We welcomed the military intervention because we had a bitter taste in our mouths from three years of chaotic parliamentary politics, franchising of local governments to the leaders of the ruling party, rampant corruption, and a fast deteriorating law and order caused largely by the goons patronized by the ruling party.

The military-led democratic rebirth would again prove to be short lived, as the jerrybuilt politi-

cal party would be mired in internal squabbles and allegations of corruption. As he was trying to bring a chaotic house to order, General Ziaur Rahman fell in the same tragic manner as the great leader before him -- at the hands of a few disgruntled army officers.

But the tide would turn soon towards the democracy that we had decried earlier. A democratic due mainly to external pressure, would now lead us on to the praetorian politics that would dominate the country for the next decade.

A new political party rose from the ashes of old Pakistan with help from some political turncoats with political neophytes in tow, and directly aided and abetted by the military establishment. The amended constitution that allowed a presidential form of government came handy in supporting this praetorian politics.

It took the country ten long years to get rid of the praetorian politics bestowed from above. It took years of struggle for people's will to return, and have the peo-

ple's rights to elect their own representatives restored.

We have had three popular elections in the last fifteen years.

These were free elections,

although there have been the usual charges of bias from those who lost.

But they have been largely fair. The products of these elections did not come through a praetorian political system, and they were not foisted from above by a coterie. Some of the choices may not have been good, but, then, we had second chances to discard them if we wanted to.

It takes years of practice for parliamentary democracy to succeed. India has had it for over sixty years, and yet there are pitfalls. Often, we see, and hear of, members of the parliament and state legislatures in that country being hauled away for offences as dire as murder, yet the country chooses to remain with a system that, in the words of Winston Churchill, may be "the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

India chooses to remain on the path of parliamentary democracy because it has safeguards, rule of law, and checks and balances. We would have no need of this type of debate today if we also had similar rule of law and right checks and balances.

Ziauddin Choudhury is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.



Iraq's quiet exodus

STEPHEN GLAIN

HE sits in an unheated two-room apartment furnished with plastic chairs and begrimed here and there with mold. Dandling his infant son on his knees, he wears the exhausted, vacant look of a man, living on the edge, scrounging daily to make ends meet and feed his wife and young family.

We have begun to question this form of democracy because we found to our dismay that the people we chose to represent our

middle class.

As little as a year ago, the number of affluent Iraqis fleeing the sectarian holocaust of Iraq for neighboring Jordan and Syria was still relatively small, scarcely more than a few dozen daily. Today it is a veritable exodus of white-collar professionals who, along with their riches, are the vertebrae of any stable society.

Initially welcomed, they are fast becoming a burden, straining local infrastructure from schools to health care and pushing up housing prices and inflation. Worst, neither they nor their increasingly reluctant hosts have any idea when, if ever, they might go home.

The exodus weighs most heavily on Iraq, which is in danger of becoming a large-scale version of Palestine's impoverished and brittle Gaza. The refugees leave behind a war-torn nation plundered of its most precious resources alongside oil -- talented and well-educated people.

Professionals like Abdul-Hadi formed the backbone of a newly vibrant middle class that emerged under Saddam Hussein. Iraq boasted world-class hospitals, universities, science labs, even art galleries.

The engineers at Iraqi Airways were certified to work on the most sophisticated technology on Boeing airliners. Many of them received generous scholarships to study abroad, all paid for by the state. "When I was a student at Cardiff in Wales, every one of my classes had Iraqis," says Ali Shukri, a retired Jordanian general and confidant to the late King Hussein. "Most were doing post-graduate work as engineers and radiologists."

Now those same professionals are a coveted prey, targeted by

insurgents and robbers for shake-downs, kidnapping and extortion -- prompting more and more to flee. Before the war there were 30,000 physicians registered in Iraq's main medical syndicate, or union. Now there are 8,000.

"Doctors are prime targets," says Abdul-Hadi from his humble quarters in Amman, where he works in a public hospital for a fraction of the pay he once earned in Iraq. "It will take 10 years to rebuild the Iraqi health sector." The same can be said of Iraq's universities. Advanced studies are no longer available at many elite colleges in Baghdad.

In many classes, students are taught not by tenured professors but by teaching assistants. Engineers, scientists, teachers, civil servants, shopkeepers and businessmen -- all are following Abdul-Hadi's path out of Iraq.

"All that's left in Baghdad are bandits and fools," says Hind Al Aazamy, a Sunni Iraqi who arrived in Jordan last summer and now runs a fashion boutique with her husband in west Amman's upscale Sweifieh district. "It will take a generation to restore what's gone."

No one has to tell that to the Iraqi government, which is doing what it can to stem the outflow. Baghdad is tightening restrictions on new passports and is said to be pressuring Jordan to send home many émigrés already in the country.

According to a UN aid worker in Amman, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, under pressure from Iraq and Jordan, recently began canceling interviews with exiles hoping to register as war refugees as a guarantee against being forcibly

returned: "This exodus makes the Iraqi government look bad," he says, "and it will make rebuilding the country close to impossible."

It's difficult to quantify either the scale or the effect of this epic brain drain. Estimates range from the generally accepted 2 million in Syria and Jordan to twice that many. Few can afford to maintain bank deposits of \$100,000, as is required by Jordanian authorities for a residency card, so many refugees smuggle themselves across the border and live as illegal aliens. And increasingly, exiles are showing up in Lebanon and Egypt.

It began as a trickle during the months after the fall of Saddam, as wealthy Iraqis, seeing the handwriting on the wall, sought refuge from the nascent insurgency. Most went to Amman, largely because its well-regarded banking sector could be trusted with their riches.

They invested in real estate, bought luxury cars and built office buildings from which they piloted their empires back home. Beyond snarling traffic in the once sleepy capital, these moneyed exiles posed little threat. Often bringing their businesses with them, they actually invigorated the local economy.

Adnan Al Malaki, an Iraqi clothing trader who left Baghdad for Damascus, is still struggling to find stock for stores back home. But declining output in Iraq has forced him to double the amount of merchandise he orders in Syria. "Iraq used to account for half our total production, but we've had to shut those factories down," says Al Malaki, sipping a demitasse in a stylish Damascus café.

As the insurgency

metastasized into civil war, the outflow of refugees accelerated. Locals are beginning to complain. In Syria, citizens grumble about rising prices, congestion and an alarming increase in crime and prostitution. "They bring with them only problems," says Jihad Yazigi, editor in chief of The Syria Report, an economic bulletin.

Jordan is also showing signs of compassion fatigue. Its tiny population of nearly 6 million has swelled by some 15 percent. In Amman, the cost of alayeh bindura -- fried tomatoes and onions, a lower-class staple -- has doubled.

Housing prices have risen by more than a third, forcing many young Jordanian couples to postpone marriage because they can no longer afford their own homes. Many in the overwhelmingly Sunni kingdom worry that the influx of so many Iraqi Shiites will one day spark the very sort of sectarian violence that is tearing their neighbor apart.

Increasingly, Jordanians are calling for a clampdown. "No more is good," says Abdel-Ghani Abdul-Hamid, who runs a produce stall in Rabbia, known for its large population of émigrés. "The Iraqis act in barbaric ways."

Last week some were fighting just outside my shop. People are now blaming the government for allowing them in." As if in response, the Jordanian government recently stopped issuing special documents that allow exiles uninhibited entry to and departure from the country.

Few blame Jordan for tightening up. For decades, the country has lumbered under the political weight of a large Palestinian diaspora that has coexisted uneasily with the indigenous population. The monarch

is also high on the hit lists of militant Islamic groups for its close relations with America and its peace treaty with Israel.

With memories still fresh of the 2005 hotel bombings that killed 57 people, security services fear that the freight of exiles could become a sort of Trojan horse. There are rumors that agents of Iraq's Mahdi Army, the militia run by Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, have infiltrated the kingdom.

Several prominent émigré businessmen have advised the Iraqi ambassador to Jordan to beware of kidnapping and assassination attempts. Should the violence in Iraq subside, some security experts warn, those insurgents allied with disgruntled Iraqi refugees may well train their sights on Jordan's monarchy.

Despite the fact that the immigrants are ethnically mixed, worried Jordanian locals, most of them Sunnis, fear the rising number of Shiites in their midst. Tensions between the United States and Iran have helped fan fears of a so-called Shiite crescent, as King Abdullah himself warned nearly two years ago.

In Parliament, some legislators have taken to demonizing Shiite Islam as a threat to Jordanian security. "When you have teachers condemning Shiites in class, that's bad," says Jost Hitlerman, Middle East project director of the International Crisis Group in Brussels. "When immigration officials are asking if visitors are Shiites or Sunnis at the airport, that's bad. And when clerics are calling for violence against Shiites, that's bad, too."

As for Iraq, the exodus may prove to be its ultimate undoing. The departure of so many white-

collar professionals and skilled workers has essentially stripped the nation of much of its human infrastructure, completing the physical destruction of the war. With the civil war marking new levels of ferocity -- and the United States showing growing impatience with its Iraq misadventure -- the brain drain can be expected to grow even worse.

All this will leave the country's future resting on an ever-shrinking cadre of experienced people to keep Iraq afloat, if and when its sectarian violence ends. And even then, there is no guaranteeing they'll ever return. "Once these people set up life abroad, they will not come back," says Laith Kubba, a former spokesman for the Iraqi government and now a senior director at the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington. "I would rather see them remain in Jordan and Syria and preserve their skills there."

Meanwhile, the younger generation of Iraqis, more than half of whom are under 30, are being robbed of their teachers, university professors and doctors -- those who care for them and serve as mentors and role models for a functioning civil society. "It's not just a question of one lost generation, but of two, and this is the most frightening thing," says Jalal Al Gaaad, a Western-educated Iraqi architect now living in Amman with his family. From this depopulated base Iraq will be hard pressed to recover, much less rise, phoenix-like, from the ashes of war.

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