

Welcome change in thinking

The two leaders right to live in the country needs to be protected

THE ban on Sheikh Hasina's entry into the country and the apparent fetters on Khaleda Zia's movements have been withdrawn.

We welcome this change in the direction of the government's policy; for it is the fundamental right of the two leaders to live in their own country. Exile holds no answer to the political problems facing us. On the contrary, it can exacerbate them.

We have been observing with concern over the last several days government being enmeshed in a nontransparent, shortsighted, confusing, and boomerang of a policy exercise pertaining to consigning of the two political leaders -- Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia -- to exile. A chronology of events will prove our point.

Closely on the heels of two advisers to the government denying that any force was being applied on the two ladies to leave the country when Sheikh Hasina set off from the USA to return to Bangladesh earlier than scheduled to face extortion and murder charges levelled against her she was requested by an adviser to stay back for a few more days. Then a press note was issued by the government debarring her entry into Bangladesh and instructing the airlines not to carry her home. She was in effect not given a boarding pass to travel to Dhaka by British Airways. Then in a tell-tale sequence a warrant of arrest was issued by the metropolitan magistrate a few hours before the BA flight from London. Once it came to be known she was not flying home the warrant was withdrawn for six months to carry out further investigation. It was injudicious and farcical, making a mockery of the legal system.

As for Begum Khaleda Zia the government faced a ruling by the High Court in a Habeas Corpus writ to produce her in court by April 27 to prove that she is not confined to her home.

Bangladesh's image abroad took a drubbing in the way the two ladies have been handled. Credibility of the government has also taken a tumble on the issue.

With the change of policy a great amount of uncertainty would have ended. We think now the government should move full speed ahead about preparation for election. We think the only durable solution to our problems can come through transfer of power to an elected government, but one that comes through a genuinely free and fair election. Let us now concentrate fully on that.

DU and great movements

Keep the memories of the valiant alive

Tis sad news that the Dhaka University authorities are not doing enough to preserve the memories of its glorious past.

The university was not only witness to but also an active participant in all progressive movements, beginning from the great Language Movement in 1952. The price that the teachers, students and employees of the university paid for upholding the rights of people was enormous particularly after the crackdown on March 25, 1971. But it is regrettable that the university authorities have not yet been able to put on record the identities of even the martyrs from DU who sacrificed their lives to protest the colonial decrees. It is a lapse that only reflects an inexplicable insensitivity to the events that had a direct bearing on the creation of the independent Bangladesh.

There are many places within the DU campus which have their own tales of the heroic deeds of students and teachers. But no attempt has so far been made to identify the places and preserve them for the students and visitors.

History has to be placed in the right perspective before the new generation. The only worthwhile move that was made by a teacher to write the history of the university, with reference to the liberation war, did not succeed after its initiator went abroad, leaving the task incomplete. Again, this is indicative of the issue being not high on the DU decision-makers' agenda. It is the teachers of the university and academics in general who often demand that the history of the liberation war be written accurately, but who will take the initiative in this respect if the DU, the cradle of progressive thinking in this country, fails in its duties?

The memories of the martyrs and all those who suffered in the hands of the colonial rulers will continue to inspire this nation in future. So one can hardly overemphasize the need for keeping them alive. Similarly, the great movements of the past won't lose appeal if people know about the heroes who offered their lives as the price for our rights and freedom.

The nation has to realize what a debt we owe to the valiant teachers, students and employees of the university. And the DU authorities have a role to play here: they must make conscious efforts to project the past events and episodes that we are proud of.

Comedy of blunders



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STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

We would hope that issues of national importance, that are deeply linked with our national interest, are not addressed in an off-the-cuff manner. The aim of the caretaker government, that is to hold a free and fair election, must not be lost sight of. In attempting to do that, the government must ensure that the situation does not become more complex and the prospect of handing over power to a democratically elected government becomes bleak. And it would be well for all concerned to remember that what is well done is done soon enough.

The focus of all government and state policies.

What really mattered was that the people wanted to turn over a new leaf in the political history of the country, and were quite willing to give the caretaker government the benefit of the time that the chief advisor had suggested it might take for presenting the country with a good election, which is upto the end of 2008. And nobody had any reason to doubt the intention of the government, which was honest as reflected by its actions on various matters. We took comfort in the government's emphasis on transparency in its actions, and on its rational approach to national issues.

Regrettably, the government's political gaffe on two very sensitive matters not only demonstrate a degree of opacity in its actions, it seems that there is also lack of coordination and of proper counsel before policies are translated into various courses of actions. The government's handling of

the issue related to the leaders of the two major parties, an issue that has come to be termed "exile issue," can hardly be called judicious, and amounts to the government shooting itself in the foot. If good intentions are not backed up by sound execution there will come a time when the people would start questioning the very intention itself.

It is then that a comedy of errors might turn into a tragedy of blunders. Honest intentions would translate into pious failures, with ramifications unknown.

The entire affair evolved from the government's intention of cleansing politics, a good intention, commencing with depriving the BNP and the AL of their leaders, a questionable means of attaining that objective. The consequence, the government has to face an embarrassing situation, having to rationalise its action for international consumption.

Although the people are quite aware of the rationale, they are not fully in accord with the way it was attempted to be carried out. These views are not mere subjective perception, but stem from the mixed signals originating from contradictory statements that have conveyed the confused state of the government's mind, and its well-intentioned but unconvincing effort to rationalise its actions.

It is not quite comprehensible that a citizen should be deprived of his or her right to enter or stay in his or her country on any ground, irrespective of the persons calling or status in society. The confusion was even more confounded by contradictory comments, emanating from two advisors, that related to the freedom of Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia to come and go in and out of the country on their own free will.

One can say that very little consideration was given to the serious ramifications of the case of Hasina, in which, in one instance, she was debarred from entering the country, and in the next a warrant of arrest

was served against her in which she was shown as absconding. It was a case bordering on the comical that, while an accused wanted to return and face the process of law in her country, the state had debarred her from doing so.

In the case of Khaleda Zia the confusions are even more bewildering. It was our understanding that the current caretaker government had pledged transparency in all government actions. One notices very little of it in the manner that the BNP chairperson's "exile" was handled. It was a very hush-hush affair that gave rise to all sorts of speculations.

As with preventing a citizen from entering his or her country, exiling a person is a violation of his/her basic right, and no amount of logic of national interest can validate an ill-considered move. An honest and pious intention cannot be achieved through an injudicious action. Unfortunately, the policy makers did very little homework before deciding on the action.

If the idea of sending the two leaders to exile emerged after deliberate considerations one can say that the sums were done very poorly, since the result did not turn out as expected. Writs filed by both the political parties have put the government in not a little bit of embarrassment, and certainly many will question its intention as being motivated by factors extraneous to the terms of reference of the current government.

And, in any case, one cannot be

sure that the departure of the two leaders would automatically make them redundant in their party politics. If the two are important factors in our politics, "defactorising" them in the way that was attempted has in many ways strengthened their position even further.

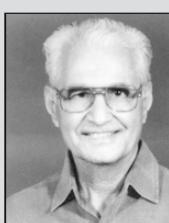
And when, perhaps, there was a general belief that Bangladesh politics would be better served if it was spared the ill-effects of the personal acrimonious equation of Hasina and Khaleda, there is again a spurt of public opinion that has gone in favour of both the leaders after the recent exile episode.

We would hope that issues of national importance, that are deeply linked with our national interest, are not addressed in an off-the-cuff manner. The aim of the caretaker government, that is to hold a free and fair election, must not be lost sight of. In attempting to do that, the government must ensure that the situation does not become more complex and the prospect of handing over power to a democratically elected government becomes bleak. And it would be well for all concerned to remember that what is well done is done soon enough.

We still have great trust in the caretaker government. It cannot fail us. But a single governmental blunder at a sensitive time can bring tragedy for the nation.

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Learning from China



MB NAQVI
writes from Karachi

PLAIN WORDS

The scope for cooperation is limitless in South Asia, and it should proceed under its own dynamism, while Pakistan should trade with all, without restricting the trade to only friends. Constant industrial development is the prerequisite for being able to export more. Today, Pakistani exports rest on just a few traditional items. The industrialization process, in an ambience of stability and efficiency, will make subservience to others, and poverty, history. Can Pakistan do it?

The secret of economic success lay in simple varieties: it maintained a stable currency and kept inflation under control; these things went a long way toward stable costs and low prices; high quality was strenuously ensured. Careful management of demand and supply supplemented the political stability. Low prices and adequate production have maintained a near full employment.

China's political behaviour has been distinctive: it has kept politics and economics strictly separate.

It went its way in politics is largely known, except that it did not insist on befriending only communist countries; it accepted all systems and all regimes. It zeroed in on the growth of economic relations and tension free ties with all.

Not that China did not have political disputes, what with the cold war, and its suspicion of Japanese and Taiwanese intentions.

But at the height of the cold war, there were frequent artillery exchanges with the US over a certain island, but the Chinese continued to increase their trade

exchanges with Japan and America, the archenemies.

It encouraged overseas Chinese to come and invest at home, even from Taiwan which it regarded as a

province in revolt. It pursued its politics peacefully and peacefully while trading with the countries that were unfriendly towards it. This lesson needs to be learnt.

In Pakistan's case there is a contradiction, in saying the right things in international politics while the regime's domestic course can be faulted on many issues. In short, Pakistan lacks political stability and is deep in crises, thanks to unwise policies.

The economic progress that the Musharraf-Shaukat Aziz duo has delivered has delivered a monetary reserve of 13 billion dollars and high growth rates. But inflation rates are high even if their computation is accepted at face value. Pakistan's recent "prosperity" has rested upon what may be a rentier role in the war on terror.

Anyways, Pakistan is firmly anchored in the western system as a non-Nato ally. It so happens that its society is facing a growing challenge from three sides: one is from Islamic extremist violence, centred mainly in NWFP and Balochistan. The second is ethnic politics in the three minority provinces.

The third is wide-scale restiveness in the population due to ever rising prices, growth in crime and

an increasing breakdown of law and order. The regime's loud satisfaction with growth coexists with high inflation rates. Growth with stable prices eludes. And if the government cannot deliver that it cannot long remain in power.

Is the politics of good formulations and getting closer to China appropriate for a country that is being kept prosperous by way of rent or price for its location, and active role in Afghanistan? There is clear inconsistency here. Pakistan cannot be a non-Nato ally of the US and yet support China and Russia, balancing America and reducing its role in Asia.

It seems that the regime is on a rebound from the Americans and other western powers after they showed their annoyance over Pakistan's inability to fight the Taliban as vigorously as they would like. Pakistan has to have a deeper understanding of its economic situation.

One is all for pursuing a China-like course. But then it should be ready to forego the financial bonanza that comes with being a satellite of US. An honest de-linking with the Afghan quagmire is surely the right course after duly shedding unrealistic imperial ambitions.

If Islamabad is ready to follow

the Chinese example, it should forget about getting linked up with any great power. It should seek good relations with all in an honourable way. Just as China was able to keep its economy (including trade) separate from political relations, so should Pakistan -- all along the line. It should have good and constructive relations with all western countries as well as Russia, China, Japan and India.

India is a special case for Pakistan, because of its location in South Asia. Pakistan is not located in the Middle East or Central Asia, though these two regions do impinge on it the most among South Asians. Pakistan must have the closest possible trade and economic relations with India, while disputes, including Kashmir and the nukes, should be pursued separately in an amicable manner and with patience. Let Kashmir, or any other dispute, not prevent full implementation of Safta in letter or spirit.

The two countries, indeed the whole South Asian region, must become a virtually visa-free zone -- or, if visas are to be retained, they should be easily available to all at airports for, say, six months or a year in one go. There should be the widest possible cultural exchanges.

If Pakistan could be formed out of British India, despite a thousand years of living together with Hindus and others, why cannot Pakistan remain stable and strong with wider rights, reformed reciprocally. Simultaneously with Pakistan building the closest possible economic cooperation and trade with India, the country has to open up and become the hub of trade in Asia, such as General Musharraf has envisioned.

But that requires multiple means of communication: first-rate roads, rails and ships. The international overland transit trade has to grow rapidly. Pakistan must build trans-continental modern roads that can carry heavy traffic, and good railway and shipping services.

The scope for cooperation is limitless in South Asia, and it should proceed under its own dynamism, while Pakistan should trade with all, without restricting the trade to only friends. Constant industrial development is the prerequisite for being able to export more.

The author is a leading Pakistani columnist.

Holding upazila election first

BARE FACTS

Last but not the least, Article 59 of the Constitution provides that local government in every administrative unit of the republic shall be entrusted to local bodies composed of persons elected in accordance with law. As stated earlier, we have, at the moment, elected local government only at the union level. Early elections to the UZPs under the CTG will be a step forward towards fulfillment of the constitutional obligation.

the next parliamentary election which, according to the CA, would be held before the end of 2008.

It may be mentioned that the upazila system, which was introduced by the Ershad government in the early eighties, aimed at making an upgraded thana, designated as upazila, the nerve centre of local administration.

An Upazila Parishad, comprising a directly elected chairman, the chairman of Union Parishads, three women members nominated by the government, specified number of upazila-based officials without voting rights, and the chairman of Upazila Central Cooperative

Association, would be responsible for the administration of the "transferred" functions which include, among other things, planning, promotion and execution of development programs, and some other functions that could be carried out at the local level.

The central government retained primarily the regulatory functions, such as maintenance of law and order, civil and criminal judiciary, administration and management of central revenue, and major development activities of national and regional scope. All this helped to transform the upazilas into focal points of administration in

the rural areas, which accommodate about 80 percent of the total population in the country.

Out of sheer political animosity, the BNP government abolished the UZPs headed by the directly elected chairmen. It is not that the upazila system was flawless. But the system was abolished before its teething troubles were over.

The general expectation was that the BNP government would retain the upazila system, and hold fresh elections to the posts of upazila chairmen. Instead of doing this, they chose to abolish the upazila system, lock, stock and barrel. This was, according to some

experts in local governance in Bangladesh, like throwing the baby out with the bath water.

The Al government (1996-2001) passed the Upazila Parishad act, 1998, for holding elections to the UZPs; but an amendment brought to the act in 2001 by the AL government gave power to the government to defer elections to the UZPs.

Neither the AL government nor the immediate past BNP government took any concrete steps to hold elections to the UZPs. It is heartening to know that the present CTG and the EC are planning to hold the much awaited upazila elections.

Now the question that may arise is: Why is it important to hold upazila elections before the election to the 9th parliament? This can create a level playing field for all the candidates in upazila elections.

First, the first and only elections to the UZPs took place during the regime of HM Ershad. There were widespread allegations of interference by the then ruling Jatiya Party. There will be no party government interference if upazila elections are held under the present CTG. Consequently, they will be peaceful, fair and neutral.

Second, the CA has promised to hold election to the 9th parliament freely, fairly and impartially before the end of 2008. Many political analysts are of the opinion that the upazila elections may turn out to be an acid test for the CTG before the parliamentary election. Experience gathered in holding the upazila elections will immensely benefit the CTG and the EC in conducting the next general election.

Third, influence of black-money and muscle has marred our election system, both at national and local levels. The CTG has initiated measures to create a congenial environment for holding the general and local level elections. This can create a level playing field for all the candidates in upazila elections.

Fourth, out of the three local government systems -- the District Board at the district level, the Local Board at the sub-division level, and the Union Committee at the union level -- introduced in Bengal during the British rule, local government in every administrative unit of the republic shall be entrusted to local bodies composed of persons elected in accordance with law.

As stated earlier, we have, at the moment, elected local government only at the union level. Early elections to the UZPs under the CTG will be a step forward towards fulfillment of the constitutional obligation.

To conclude, the holding of upazila election on a non-party basis prior to parliamentary election is expected to be warmly welcomed by the people, in particular by the rural people. The revival of elected local governments in every administrative unit of the republic, including the upazila, and making them effective is not only a constitutional obligation but also a sine qua non for rural advancement.

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