

Removing restrictions on VoIP

Fast-track the preparatory phase

Welcome the government's decision in principle to remove restrictions on VoIP operations. Now that the council of advisers has made clear the government's intent to open up the Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP), the operational guidelines should be drawn up as expeditiously as possible. The ministries of science and information communication technology, post and telecommunications and information have been tasked to provide specific inputs for policy formulation in this regard. They must set a timeframe for themselves to complete the job sooner than later so that the government can go about implementing the policy decision at the earliest. The normal bureaucratic approach should be eschewed with an extra bit of dynamism brought to bear on the task. There is no logic whatsoever for delaying access of the common people to this inexpensive and speedy mode of communication technology.

The restrictive policy on VoIP operations had spawned illegal business with the result that thousands of crores of taka in government revenue were lost to clandestinely operated companies. One measure of potential for legal VoIP business is provided by the fact that the number of calls through normal ISD channel has increased manifold after the joint forces had busted a few dozen illegally run commercial firms.

If the VoIP is opened up there will be multiple competition in the market leading to lowering of charges and delivery of efficient services at the doorstep of the people. It was simply unthinkable in the modern era to deny ourselves of the facility that countries in the neighbourhood have made full use of, let alone the highly advanced countries.

It's worthwhile to go into why the previous governments followed a shut-off policy on VoIP thereby in effect allowing vested groups to enjoy monopoly business and that too illegally in this sector while the government kept losing revenue. A probe needs to be instituted into the reasons why we are being such a late comer in the field as well as the role of people in high places who apparently obstructed switchover to the facility.

The criteria set for licensing and procedures eventually formulated should be business-friendly.

Cricket World Cup

Rain-marred finale

THE curtain has come down on the cricket World Cup 2007 on 28 April amidst rain and some swashbuckling performances from top class cricketers of the world. The stormy batting of Australia's Adam Gilchrist added enough spice to enliven the game thereby making the final a memorable one. By any measure, the winners deserved to take the trophy home, for the third time in a row. Congratulations Australia! Sri Lanka, the only Asian team to reach the finals went down a fighting loser.

Cricket World Cup this time around was stalked by the memory of the alleged murder of Pakistan's coach Bob Woolmer. It saddened the cricket lovers all over the world and they want to see the culprits brought before justice. Woolmer's contribution to improving cricket in Pakistan will be remembered by all for a long time.

The 2007 World Cup did cause some jolts, and Bangladesh played a major yet outstanding role in two of those. They upset the calculations of most experts by defeating India and South Africa and thus creating hopes to enter the Super Eights, which they ultimately did. Another hiccup came when Ireland beat Pakistan by a huge margin. To say the least, the slaying of the giants by the minnows amply thrilled the spectators.

This World Cup was the last one played by great cricketers like Brian Lara, Inzamamul Haque, Glen McGrath and Russel Arnold, some of the brightest stars in modern day cricket. They are holders of some enviable records, which remain to be broken by the future cricketers. All of them were true professionals and have given their best to their teams and entertained the crowd with high-class performance. It will take years to fill the void left by these cricketers.

Perhaps a lot would be discussed in the near future regarding the duration of the game, venues, accommodation and other facilities available during the World Cup. We are sure the authorities would look into the lapses and take measures so that the future events turn out to be more entertaining than rigorous.

In quest of sobriety in our politics



M ABDUL HAFIZ

PERSPECTIVES

It is to the credit of the caretaker government that it is in the process of driving the dishonest and corrupt politicians out of the ring through a vigorous drive against criminalisation of politics as well as macro-corruption like extortion, land grabbing and monopoly by force of the country's trade, commerce and business. To supplement this effort, politicians themselves will have to come forward to reform their respective political parties. There seems to be a unanimity of views of both the major political parties in this regard. In the ensuing catharsis only the very best will be churned out.



SEVEN as the present caretaker dispensation sets out on an uncharted course after assuming office on January 11, the contour of its agenda gradually came into clear relief with the policy pronouncements from time to time by the authority at the helm. What, however, remained blotchy was its position with regard to the two top political leaders of the country.

The issue came to the fore when the government, on April 18, slapped an embargo on Sheikh Hasina's return to the country from her private trip to the US, while there was already an undeclared but widely reported restriction on Khaleda Zia's movement amid rumor of her being sent to exile. The mystery thickened as the government kept total silence on the matter, breeding wild speculations.

The government steps weren't, however, favourably viewed, either by the people at large or by over-

seas observers. This disfavour was obvious in the sullen mood of the public squeezed between continuing price hike and high inflation.

The government drew flak from

the US and Britain, both of which showed concern over the situation

obtaining in Bangladesh. The outside world was curiously watching the developments. An eerie calm prevailed in our civil society, at least initially.

In the view of the ordinary folk, baffled by the high drama of higher

politics, it wasn't time for the power game inherent in it. Instead, the priority could have been to address the hard issues of everyday life -- further hit by the recent increase in fuel price, which adversely affects the whole spectrum of life.

When the chance of increase in the prices of utility services hangs like the Sword of Damocles over their heads, the people are indeed uncertain whether the gambit was essential at this stage. Moreover, the policy of exiling top leaders of two major political parties smacks too much of Pakistan's martial politics, which the Pakistanis themselves are desperately trying to get rid of.

In the meantime, look at the strange behaviour of the politicians! A volatile Sheikh Hasina is still obsessed with her poetic hyperbole, which is both annoying to others and damaging for herself. While it could be in the interest of the AL supreme who had just been spared an ordeal, to watch her words, she remains prone to landing herself in fresh controversy.

On the other hand, a beleaguered Khaleda Zia, who headed the country's most corrupt government till recently, seems to have garnered some public sympathy with her sheer composure and measured reticence.

The kudos is, however, due to the caretaker government for its prompt identification of emerging public mood and timely decision to reverse its earlier stance, although few know as yet whether or not the strategy of isolating the top leaders from politics is abandoned altogether, or it is merely a change of course. It is, however, hoped that the present government -- a meritocracy with a mission -- does

understand that they deal with a people historically imbued with democratic impulse.

Democracy has, through the ages, created its own chemistry, dynamics and equation, which die hard even in the worst of adversities. It may, at times be noisy and messy, but does not suffer decline on those counts. But an attempt to over-regulate will surely choke it to death.

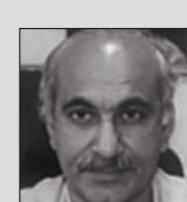
It is to the credit of the caretaker government that it is in the process of driving the dishonest and corrupt politicians out of the ring through a vigorous drive against criminalisation of politics as well as macro-corruption like extortion, land grabbing and monopoly by force of the country's trade, commerce and business.

To supplement this effort, politicians themselves will have to come forward to reform their respective political parties. There seems to be a unanimity of views of both the major political parties in this regard.

Diverse views are good in political discourse, but we are having too many of them. It is feared that they will only circumscribe the political process, and, thus, a free and fair election -- the central goal of the government.

Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

Up and down



M J AKBAR

BYLINE

From the head, power seeped into the ozone layer. I wish I could say that it slipped through the fingers, but the metaphor refuses to descend. It is only when you live in the stratosphere that you believe that votes will come when a golden chariot ploughs through an election crowd. Votes stick in a honeycomb, patiently constructed, cell-by-cell, village-by-village. The Congress has no party structure left from one end of the Ganga to the other, in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar or Bengal, and no leader with the time or interest to do hard, street-level work.

REVIVAL is now a fact. If it crosses 120 seats, it can bring out the

drums.

The Congress is best positioned to cry, since its unexpected success in the general elections of 2004 lifted expectations skywards. Three years later, when it should have been looking at three-digit results, it has lowered the bar so far that it has become a very low jump. Congress strategists are getting ready to congratulate themselves if the party gets 35 seats out of over 400.

A person, who was not born in the winter of 1984-85, when the Congress swept every seat in Uttar Pradesh, has voted for the first time in this assembly election. A generation has matured into voters but, twenty years and three presidents later, the Congress has still not found the political pulse of India's most important electoral state.

The Samajwadi Party is in power, and began the election campaign promising it would return to power. It will now declare victory if it is the second largest party. The Bahujan Samaj Party thought it was ailing a wave. There will be garlands of currency notes if it gets between 130 and 140 seats.

The BJP is best positioned to smile, since it began with no expectations at all after its disastrous collapse in the general elections three years ago. If the BJP crosses a hundred seats, its president Rajnath Singh can assert that its

what matters to voters but on what matters to politicians.

Discount, therefore, all the statements about integrity being made during the polls. All options are open. Everyone is ready to sleep with anyone, as long as the pre-nuptial agreement is acceptable. The only possibility that can be ruled out is an alliance between the BJP and the Congress, but that is a non-starter even in mathematical terms: the two together will not add up to a majority in the House.

Rahul Gandhi, who seems to be campaigning as much against former prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao as anyone else, remarked that the 1996 Congress alliance with the BSP, fashioned by Rao, was a historic blunder.

That assessment is absolutely accurate, but it will not prevent Congress from supporting, or even joining, a Mayawati government if the Congress gets 40 seats and the BSP can top 140. (They can always turn that into a majority with the help of independents and defectors.)

Rajnath Singh might assert, with a straight face (and if you look at his

picture, you will notice that he has a very straight face indeed), that the BJP treats every other party as untouchable, but cometh the hour, cometh the touchability.

If the numbers add up, both Mayawati and Mulayam Singh Yadav will happily take BJP's support to form a government. They might be less happy about lending support to a BJP government, but the future is all in the numbers. Crunch those UP numbers and you never know what might fall out.

The Congress, which keeps a lot hidden up its long khadi sleeve, also has what might be called a post-democratic option: to use the fractured result as an opportunity to impose president's rule so that it can exercise hundred percent authority despite getting less than ten percent of the seats.

The governor of Uttar Pradesh will happily issue an edict declaring that no party is in a position to form a stable government and, therefore, he should become the fountainhead from which all decisions and privileges flow.

The snag, of course, is that while

the Congress might have an obedient governor, it does not have a pliable president of India. President Kalam's popularity ratings are exploding upwards precisely because he has been correct and Constitutional, instead of tweaking ethics to play politics. He is not going to compromise in the last days of his first term.

It is entirely appropriate, then, that a second Kalam term will be heavily influenced by the election results of Uttar Pradesh. There should have been no debate. A direct election for president of India would have been no contest.

Opinion polls show something in the nature of 80% support for President Kalam. But the electorate consists of MPs and MLAs, so it becomes a game between political parties.

The UP results will not affect the numbers too much, but they will affect the course that different parties choose to take. Without anyone realising it, support for the ruling UPA coalition has come down by over 45 MPs. The government still enjoys a majority, but how comfortable that will be in a secret ballot is an open question. Partners must have confidence in the popularity of the core party in any coalition.

That confidence is ebbing from the Congress, and if it shows no hope of revival in Uttar Pradesh, after having displayed none in Bihar and Bengal in the last two years, then tiny little question marks begin to form in the mind, waiting to grow into huge exclamation marks.

The Congress government in Delhi has been singularly responsi-

ble for wasting a historic opportunity to rebuild the party's momentum, and rediscover its place as the preferred home of Indian politics. Government is an opportunity to put together the blocks that can establish a network of voting groups that can re-elect you.

In 2004, the Congress skillfully created a coalition at the top, of parties who could dominate Parliament. It then forgot to create a coalition of voters, who would have kept the ruling alliance's feet anchored to the ground. When power goes to your head, you can't look down.

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Votes stick in a honeycomb, patiently constructed, cell-by-cell, village-by-village. The Congress has no party structure left from one end of the Ganga to the other, in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar or Bengal, and no leader with the time or interest to do hard, street-level work.

If semantics were sufficient, there could have been four chief ministers of Uttar Pradesh, and maybe five prime ministers of India. There is a solution for such an inconvenient Constitution. Our legislators could always amend it. With three prime ministers acting as co-brothers, which coalition could ever fail?

MAKbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

Cairo chronicle

SAAD S. KHAN

ice cube in a pot of boiling water not only melts the cube but burns the hand as well.

And a related issue is that forcing democracy through arms and army is never the best option. The US has enough leverage in the region, so that if it only uses its moral weight against naked use of force by the local thug-like rulers a gradual transition to responsible government will be the order of the day.

One must underline that the United States is in Iraq, not by choice. By the time of the invasion such a situation had already arisen in Iraq, not the least because of the US's earlier tolerance of Saddam Hussein, that the cost of inaction -- for the US in particular and the world in general -- surpassed the cost of military intervention. Hence, the US decision, even flouting UN reservations.

The US system of governance has so many and so effective checks and balances that one expects it to be difficult to make a thoughtless mistake of such magnitude. The misrule and despotism by other local vampires has been lost sight of in the media hype created by the war.

Saddam is the danger appreciated that, just as Washington's calculations in 2003 in not dislodging a docile and tamed Saddam

posed greater risk to her regional interests, it is a matter of time that other dictators could become liabilities in the not too distant future.

Take, for instance, the Mubarak family in Egypt who have nearly taken their country to the precipice where Iraq was just before the invasion. If the US policy of pampering Mubarak as an ally, to the extent of abetting his brutal reign, is not reversed, it may not be too long that Egypt explodes.

If Mubarak is replaced in a coup, or thrown out in an "orange revolution," anarchy may prevail over the puppet office of prime minister, and minor improvement in parliamentary power of debating the budget, are aimed at giving it a façade of reform.

Nobody is duped, not even the United States. Condoleezza Rice, the secretary of state, has also expressed mild concern over the turn of events. It is probably because of her that this time, unlike two years ago, the government did not let loose its goons to beat the men and grope the women protesting against the referendum fraud.

The government was more subtle this time, and potential protestors were already locked in jails where the beating and raping took place at leisure behind walls. So, at least, there was no public humiliation for those who called for democracy.

This time, the government also avoided the joke of claiming 80 percent turnout and 95 percent yes vote. A modest figure of 25 percent turnout, with 75 percent of them endorsing the proposed changes,

was announced by the rubber stamp electoral commission.

This comes down to 18 percent of the Egyptian electorate whose support Mubarak officially claims. Even this is a tall order in a country where hatred for the regime and its (mis)rule is writ large on every face. If the same referendum had been held under the UN or any other international body, even a five percent affirmative vote would have been a distant possibility.

The political dissidents are not the only ones to be electrocuted and raped. Thanks to the emergency law in force for half a century -- the recent referendum has only replaced it by a more draconian anti-terror law -- the security services are at liberty to play with the life, honour and property of any citizen.

Hosni Mubarak is one of those tyrants who never made any pretence of democracy. He brutalizes his nation, and does so with remarkable temerity and shameful impunity. With the world rapidly embracing democracy with despots reaching, or being on way to, the gallows, Mubarak and his clique are behaving as the proverbial cartoon, seeing nothing, hearing nothing!

Mubarak never fails to mention that "nobody can stop him from

serving the nation" (read: I will not quit as long as I live); "The pace of reforms will continue" (I will make sure that whatever legal gimmickry is still needed for smooth succession of my son, will be done); "enemies of Egypt will be brought to justice" (read: anyone questioning the political dispensation favouring me will be murdered or tortured).

Torture, as noted, is not and never was reserved for political dissidents, but it has come on them with so much vengeance that even the "Kifaya" movement that had surfaced with a big bang just two years ago, arranging massive demonstrations calling for democracy, has all but fizzled out.

In a recent demonstration, there were hardly a few dozen ideologues there to receive the punches and kicks from the police. It was a sad anti-climax to the hopes generated when, on the eve of the 2005 referendum, thousands would respond to the calls to gather in the main streets of Cairo, to demand justice and freedom.

The only veritable opposition is the "Muslim Brotherhood," which has been banned since 1954 following an abortive assassination attempt on President Nasser. Nowadays the horrors shown in Hollywood blockbuster "Black Hawk Down," of treatment of politi-

cal prisoners in Egypt under Nasser, are being re-enacted. So, most young men have lost interest in politics, or are too scared of acquiring this interest.

On the eve of Eidul Fitr, October 23,