

Saga of the two ladies and beyond

The two ladies in our political arena have to face the law like any other citizen, if there are charges against them. They cannot be above the law. However, any non-transparency in dealing with them would hurt the overall reform process. Blaming them for all the misdeeds only covers up the real problem. We must accept the fact that both of them have been our elected leaders.

MAMUN RASHID

It was mid January 2006, I was talking to a former World Bank senior who had many things to do with Bangladesh in his previous job, and had made one or two visits also. He was quite blunt, and said that all of the problems in Bangladesh were because of the two lady political leaders, and if they could be thrown into the Bay of Bengal the problems would be solved.

As long-term humble corporate executives, we learn how to accept "knowledge donations" from the seniors, to be submissive subordinates. So I swallowed his "instant coffee" typesolution.

I was on board a British Airways (BA) flight to Dhaka in the first week of March. The business class was almost empty; giving ample scope to the dedicated cabin service director to have a "more than a smile" type discussion with the passengers, incidentallyme.

Again the same old comment to a typical Bangladeshi: "I see you are having lots of problems back in your country because of your two lady politicians." When I wanted to take the discussion further he said that this was what he came to know from various journals and magazines.

I thanked him for not giving a solution like "taking the two ladies on a BA flight 39,000 feet above sea level and then crashing" to help the former British colony to have a better future.

It is becoming apparent from recent incidents that the political elite of the country is trying to face the mass disgust against the politicians, and the general outcry for reform (political or economic), by shifting the blame onto the two ladies.

Everywhere I go, I get the impression that there is a feeling that every evil in our country's political and overall environment has been caused by the vicious influence of these two ladies -- leaders of two large parties. If we can just get rid of these two women, all the problems of our country can be instantly resolved. I am, of course, saddened by the shallowness of this argument, if not the distinct male chauvinism.

It is disheartening that many in the diplomatic community, as well as influential people bracketed as "civil society," are also tilted toward such views; if I may be more precise --they are significantly contributing to this school of thought.

This is not to say that I believe that the two ladies are blameless. The responsibility for the political distortion that has taken place in our system rests on both of them. However, I feel that castigating the two ladies greatly obscures the greater issue -- ridding our society of all sorts of corruption and establishing the rule of law.

The reforms that the current government has initiated, and which has wholehearted public support, are the result of total system failure. The system failed to establish the rule of law, because all the institutions which were supposed to provide adequate check and balance could not do so.

All the institutions in the society failed to punish the evil and protect the good, efficient and honest. The responsibility for that lies with all of us. Our politicians failed to raise their voices when black money and muscle power infiltrated into their parties, and rampant corruption compromised them.

Our businessmen evaded taxes, and paid bribes to get a bigger piece of

the pie. Judges were appointed to serve narrow party interests. Civil servants had been bought to enhance corruption. Leaders avoided paying the minimum possible tax.

The examples could go on and on. The victims of all this have been the virtues, and the beneficiaries have been the evil ones. To rectify this overwhelming situation, we need structural reform that would have to include all of us. The current govt. has started the process, but it is unlikely that they will be able to complete it within their tenure (18 months or whatever it would be).

It will require effort and good intention from all of us to build and strengthen the institutions. As institutions cannot be built overnight, it would require years of effort. The success of that effort would largely depend upon the extent of transparency with which it has been carried.

Any doubt about the transparency of the process will distort the whole reform process. Today's convict on corruption charges will be rehabilitated tomorrow as a "victim." As a country we will be again faced with the vicious cycle of corruption.

The two ladies in our political arena have to face the law like any other citizen, if there are charges against them. They cannot be above the law. However, any non-transparency in dealing with them would hurt the overall reform process. Blaming them for all the misdeeds only covers up the real problem.

We must accept the fact that both of them have been our elected leaders. They have led us for years against autocracy, and fought extremely hard to establish democracy. Under their leadership, in the last 15 years, the economy has blossomed with a



growth rate of around 5 percent.

A strong private sector has developed, and has established itself as the driver of economic development. Various development indicators have shown significant improvement. However, they have failed in many areas as well.

They have failed to protect all the institutions from partisanship. Their parties have become hostage to black money and muscle power. Their authoritarian activities have demolished democracy within their party.

Corruption and nepotism was bred in the society.

Their personal animosity and rivalry has caused a deep division in the country, and the interest of the country has always been sacrificed for narrow partisanship. All these misdeeds have to be properly investigated. However, we also must be ready to take our share of the responsibility for all these misdeeds, as we share all the achievements.

If we think that by just putting all the blame on the two ladies and

refusing to acknowledge our responsibility we shall be able to implement the reforms that we all earnestly yearn for, we are living in fool's paradise.

Our leaders have failed miserably, as we all have failed, to make a significant contribution to enhancing check and balance in all our institutions. What is the guarantee that the same politician, who is now saying that he cannot be honest and vocal in the presence of Hasina or Khaleda, will be honest and upfront in the presence of another dominant leader?



The same question applies to our civil servants, judges and businessmen, as well. The answer to that lies in the fact that only the presence of strong institutions can guarantee that.

The rule of the two ladies was full of misdeeds. All of these misdeeds have to be brought into accountability. However, that has to be done in the most transparent way possible, otherwise the effectiveness of the whole reform program will not be sustainable.

Blaming the two ladies for all the

misdeeds will distort the true nature of our problem, and create serious obstacles in implementing the reforms. All of us must remain alert so that the entire reform process does not lose its focus. Otherwise, the same old "nexus" of corrupt interest would take hold of the situation.

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Sarkozy's reform package

France has a highly politicized and educated polity. It has shown its impatience and restlessness when it came to serious reforms. The French, particularly the younger generation, will wait to give Sarkozy enough time to deliver. Sarkozy will do well not to forget the student uprisings in 1968 and, most recently, the riots of Autumn 2005 and Spring 2006. The success of Sarkozy's government will depend on the nature of his reform manifesto. Unpopular drastic policy changes can take a serious toll of his new government.

MAHMOOD HASAN

FRANCE has just held its presidential elections. The centre-right Union for Popular Movement (UMP) candidate Nicholas Sarkozy has secured the 18th Century Elysee Palace for the next five years. The swearing-in ceremony will take place on May 16.

The presidential election in France is unique in many ways. If a candidate wins more than 50% vote in the first round, then there is no call for a second round. But that has hardly happened, because the first round always had several candi-

dates and none secured more than 50% vote, hence, the second round with the top two contenders.

However, it has to be remembered that leading in the first round does not guarantee ultimate success. Twice in the last five elections - 1974 and 1995 -- the first-round winners lost the run-off. In 1974, Francois Mitterand led in the first round and lost to Valery Giscard d'Estaing in the second round, and in 1995 Lionel Jospin led in the first round and lost to Jacques Chirac in the run off.

There is a saying in France that in the first round people "vote with

their hearts," and in the second round they "vote with their heads."

The first round was held on April 22, in which 12 candidates raced to reach the top two slots. While nearly 85% of 44.5 million voters cast their ballots -- the first round produced interesting results.

The former interior minister Nicholas Sarkozy (UMP), got 31.1% votes, while the socialist candidate Ms Segolene Royal (Socialist Party) obtained 25.8% votes. The centrist candidate Francois Byrou (Union for French Democracy - UDF) came up with 18.6%.

According to the rules of the

game, the run-off between the two top candidates -- Sarkozy and Royal -- was held on May 6, in a classic right-left electoral battle. Between the first round and the run-off, the two candidates tried desperately to win over the vote bank of Francois Byrou, which was a significant 7 million.

Though Sarkozy was leading in the IFOP opinion polls (April 29) with 52.5 percentage points over Royal's 47.5% -- there was no let-up in the campaign. While Sarkozy tried to maintain his lead, Royal wanted to close the gap.

In the fiercely contested run-off, Sarkozy pulled off victory with 53% against Royal's 47%. The voter turnout of 85.5%, the highest in several decades, reflected how polarized the polity was. Chauvinist France rejected the first ever woman presidential candidate. The Socialist Party lost the presidential election for the third time in a row. There will be serious soul searching in the Socialist Party now.

Segolene Royal does not hold any important position in the Socialist Party. Socialist Party Secretary General Francois Holland was at one time the likely choice to become the presidential candidate. But bickering within the Socialist camp threw Holland's charming partner (now wife) Segolene Royal to the forefront in summer 2005. Royal had served as minister in Mitterand's cabinet. She was elected to parliament in 1988.

Byrou, interestingly, has emerged as a political heavyweight, and is likely to win a significant number of seats in the National Assembly at the general elections in June. He will most likely become the leader of the opposition, a position currently held by Francois Holland, the General Secretary of the Socialist Party.

Both the candidates were locked in a bitter campaign, with each trying to undermine the other with propaganda and personal attacks. Now that the elections are over, many would be keenly watching how Sarkozy leads the Fifth Republic. His first task will be to unify the polarized nation. Victory celebrations in Paris turning into riots after the declaration of results proves that the nation is ideologically divided.

Nicholas Sarkozy is the son of an

Hungarian immigrant and French mother of Greek-Jewish descent. Divorced and remarried, he has two sons from his first wife and a young son from his second marriage. He also has two stepdaughters from his wife's first marriage. Sarkozy studied law at the University of Paris and is a lawyer. Born in 1955, he is from the new generation of French leaders which does not carry the baggage of the World Wars.

Sarkozy joined politics quite early and became Mayor of Neuilly-sur-Seine, a wealthy Parisian suburb, in 1983 at the age of 28. He was elected to the parliament in 1988 and got his ministerial portfolio in 1993. Between 2002 and 2007 he served the Chirac government as finance minister and then as interior minister.

He is the Leader of UMP, which has the majority in the National Assembly, and is known for his tough stand on crime and immigration. The Left accuse Sarkozy of being a conservative leader, while others say he is a pragmatist. Hyperactive Sarkozy announced his candidature for the presidency in late 2004. The president-elect is described as a determined and focused person.

Sarkozy has taken the reins of France at a time when the sixth largest economy of the world is not doing too well. French GDP in 2006 was \$ 1.9 trillion at a growth rate of 2.1%. Unemployment remains high, and there are serious worries over immigration and law and order.

Welfare and social security issues also have to be addressed seriously. Externally, he will have to focus on and redefine three major foreign policy issues -- the European Union, the relations with US, and French connection with Africa.

National issues

With regard to the economy, Sarkozy has promised the following measures:

- National public debt in 2006 was 64.7% of GDP, i.e. \$ 1.210 trillion. Sarkozy wants to cut it down to 60% of GDP over the next five years. This means that either there will be a cut in government expenditure, or there will be more taxes.
- Exempting overtime income (i.e. beyond the 35-hour workweek)

from tax and social security charges, thereby returning almost \$ 90 billion per annum back to the people. Sarkozy is encouraging France to work more and earn more. This strategy, he thinks, will encourage higher incomes leading to more consumption, and also provide incentive to new domestic investment.

- Making the employment law flexible to create more jobs. It may be recalled that in April 2006, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin almost lost his job when he introduced the CPE (Contrat Première Embauche -- first employment contract). The CPE had provisions that allowed an employer to dismiss a new employee within the first two years, without showing any reason. Under the existing law, an employer cannot terminate a contract unless he pays a hefty compensation to the employee. Young students and the labour organisations fought street battles for three weeks all over France, and compelled Villepin to withdraw the CPE. Sarkozy wants to reintroduce the CPE with some modifications to encourage employers to hire more people. Many feel that flexibility in "hire and fire" can reduce the unemployment figures, which now stands at 9.1% of the labour force of nearly 28 million (2006).
- Reforming the Social Welfare scheme, so that those retiring from the private sector get similar pension benefits to those of the public sector. This will of course require huge funds, which Sarkozy has not indicated from where he will get.
- French industries will have to be made more innovative and efficient -- albeit under protection. Here Sarkozy's conservative colours look very prominent.

Sarkozy has made some very tough remarks regarding the law and order situation in France. It may be recalled that in Autumn 2005 serious rioting broke out in a suburb of Paris over the death of two young immigrants. The month long rioting spread all over France, and cost some 20,000 vehicles burnt or destroyed. Sarkozy blamed the delinquent

immigrant communities (from Africa and the Magreb) for the lawlessness. He intends to impose strict sentences for repeat offenders, and tougher sentences for juvenile delinquents. He has already made clear that his government will be tough on illegal immigrants.

One remembers Sarkozy's campaign quote, which summarizes his attitude towards the immigrant population: "In France a politician is not allowed to say that a hoodlum is a hoodlum, and scum is scum." (Toulouse, April 2007).

External issues

Jacques Chirac's presidency received a harsh jolt when the disenfranchised French electorate decisively rejected the European Constitutional Treaty (TCE) at the referendum of May 29, 2005. Chirac, during the remaining two years, did not try to revive this issue for fear of popular unrest.

Sarkozy cannot afford to sit on this crucial issue. He proposes to submit a reduced treaty -- confined to institutional matters, such as the duration of EU presidency and creation of a post of Minister for European Affairs. Here Sarkozy may face stiff opposition from all the capitals that have already ratified the TCE.

Besides, Sarkozy plans to push the mini-treaty through the French National Assembly, not through referendum. Here, too, he is likely to face tough opposition from his own compatriots. Sarkozy explains that the mini-treaty will provide a modus operandi for the European Union to work together.

On other European issues -- Sarkozy does not want Turkey as full member of EU, but as a strategic partner. He also wants a pause in further enlargement of the EU now that Romania and Bulgaria have joined, raising the total to 27.

Sarkozy will have to do a lot of work, particularly with Britain and Germany, before he can really establish a working equation and push all the other 26 members of the European Union to see things his way. Every capital of EU feels the necessity of creating an integrated European block to be economically more competent -- to grapple with the issues of globalization and the challenges posed by nations such as

US and China.

Gaullist Chirac had followed an independent foreign policy. Chirac's departure from, and Sarkozy's entry into, the Elysee Palace will probably clear the air with Washington. French foreign policy, at least in the perception of Washington, is marked by "arrogance." During the election campaign Sarkozy defended Chirac's policy over Iraq. But, in September 2006, he visited Washington to befriend the White House.

Photographs with President Bush caused some embarrassment to him during the election campaign. The French did not approve of Sarkozy's attempt to woo Washington. However, in his victory speech, Sarkozy assured Washington of French friendship. He, however, added that amongst friends you could agree and sometimes disagree. One will have to wait and see how that friendship unfolds.

Francophone Africa remains France's exclusive zone of influence since the early 60s. Chirac's personal friendship with African leaders, including the notorious ones, has earned France special commercial advantages over the decades.

Many of those leaders have not lived up to European standards of human rights, democracy or accountability. Sarkozy will need to come out of the shadow of Chirac and look at these privileged relations, and probably redefine them. In the victory speech, he spoke of helping the African countries in fighting disease, hunger and poverty.

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