

120 days of the Fakhruddin government

Focus on the election please

THE caretaker government (CG) led by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed has passed four months in office and it is a good time to take a stock of what has been its achievement so far. While there are several excellent initiatives undertaken by the CG, which have received the approbation of the people, there are several issues that should have fared better on.

There has been wide-scale acclaim of the way it had initiated the anti-corruption and anti-crime drive. What we are waiting for, however, is the conduct of trial of the alleged offenders in a transparent manner, and the conviction of the guilty through the due process of law. In this regard we cannot say that we are not a little disappointed at the delay in the framing of charges and the start of trial in respect of the high-profile alleged offenders now in custody.

The recasting of the Election Commission (EC) has revived its credibility that was at a low ebb not very long ago. And the Anti-Corruption Commission that was kept toothless, perhaps deliberately, has been invested with more clout to address the issue. In similar vein, we hope, the Public Service Commission, under its new Chairman, will strive to wipe the partisan stain that smeared the statutory institution of the government. Some of the bottlenecks that had plagued cargo handling at Chittagong Port have been removed and it has certainly become more efficient.

On the other end of the scale, considering that the primary mandate of the interim government is holding a free and fair election, one feels that the EC could have moved faster in finding a solution to the matter of the type of voter list we ought to have. Also, the government should have innovated a way out of the present ban on politics to initiate a dialogue with the political parties, one of the main stakeholders, and without whose participation no comprehensive political reforms can be initiated. The galloping price hike has been a negative factor in the rating of the government performance.

We feel that the main focus of the government should be the election. But polls without reforms would not be acceptable to the people. Thus towards that end it must remove the ban on indoor politics immediately to allow the EC to start dialogue with the political parties on political reforms. It will also be worth keeping in mind that with limited time at its disposal the government it can hardly afford getting mired in damage control and crisis management exercises that do very little for its credibility.

Tony Blair's departure

From symbol of change to a diminished leader

TONY Blair walks away from power convinced that he has ensured Britain's place in the world. There could be some truth in that conviction, in the sense that through undiluted cooperation with the United States, first under Bill Clinton and then George W. Bush, Blair inaugurated a new phase in what has always been known as London's special relationship with Washington. At another level, the Blair period has been one of forging greater links with Europe and playing a major role in a redefinition of politics through the European Union. Elsewhere, it is in Africa where the departing British leader will be remembered for his efforts toward reducing poverty and promoting good government in the continent. Importantly, Blair leaves office before the end of his term, which ought to serve as a guideline for those who believe in democracy.

And yet, for all the enthusiasm with which he came to power in 1997 and the intensity with which he tried to project his leadership, it is Iraq that has clearly marred Tony Blair's claim on history. In the early days in office, it was messianic zeal that convinced him he could be a figure of Churchillian proportions. And what better way to reach such heights than through projecting himself as an able war leader? Only, in this case, the war was based not on a moral compulsion to make the world a better place for everyone but on a falsehood related to nonexistent weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The theory of pre-emptive strike put into practice negated the principles of international law and civility. The unequivocal support Blair gave President Bush despite the unmasking of the lie perpetrated by the two men led to a natural result --- a swift erosion of support for the British leader. On his watch, British young men have died unnecessarily in a conflict that need not have been invented in early 2003. In the end, it was Iraq which left Tony Blair a diminished leader. In 1994, when he took charge of the Labour Party, he was a young symbol of hope. In 1997, as a new prime minister, he was emblematic of great expectations. Now he looks set to walk away into the twilight little mourned.

The mantle of leadership will soon pass into the hands of the hard-driving Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown. The new man does not have Blair's charisma, but as czar of the British economy for a decade, he has demonstrated purposeful leadership. We therefore welcome Brown, whom Blair has already endorsed as his successor, as Britain's next leader.

Time to choose



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

GOING DEEPER

In our case, the success in various sectors of the society achieved by the interim government in its short period in power, and acknowledged by the great majority of the people, devolves upon us the responsibility to be patient, to enable the interim government, Election Commission, Anti-Corruption Commission, and the allied agencies to complete their mission. A return to locust years of barren economic development and corrupt administration must be avoided at all cost.

THE debate currently raging in the political landscape in our country is how soon the postponed election to the parliament should be held, as the 18 months time thought to be necessary by the Election Commission for holding a free and fair election under congenital conditions is now being questioned.

A petition has also been made to the judiciary on the constitutional competence of the present interim government to govern and the Election Commission to function. While any exploration into the question of accountability of the government in power is to be encouraged, one must, at the same time, be conscious of a citizen's responsibility to the dynamic of the prevailing situation before attempts are made to change the existing structure.

One may consider the task of the present interim government to be a "civilizing mission" to reform a fallen and decrepit system in order

of fatalism.

But there is the distinct possibility that such frustration, the result of deception by the elected leaders, can turn into violent expression, threatening the seeming societal stability and effectively fracturing the society into haves and have-nots of different shades. In this milieu, religious militants of al-Qaeda variety, who have already made their presence known in the country, can easily get recruits for their jihadi campaign to establish Islamic rule.

The recent arrest of Zadid al-Qaeda followers, after the execution of JMB leaders and bomb blasts in three railway stations, gives rise to fresh doubts about the extinction of religious fanaticism in Bangladesh.

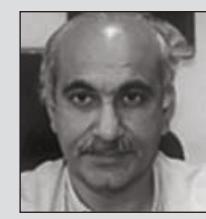
The question that may be asked is whether the present interim government, or the future elected government, would be better equipped to deliver the social goods sorely needed by the people.

Unquestionably, the mess created by the immediate past four-party alliance government through mal-administration and the government formed after the emergency rule proclaimed on January 11 has halted unbridled corruption. If an election is held soon it is doubtful that the Augean stables can be cleared, and it may not produce much qualitative change in the politics of the nation.

More likely than not the trial of the corrupt will be put on hold, and the fugitives from justice will reappear taking advantage of old political connections which, in the past, had been bonded through money and muscle during long association with political leaders.

Fear, perhaps justifiably, has been expressed by some that alternatives to elected governments in the past did not produce good results for the people, and democracy was only traded for veiled dictatorship which did not always

Exit, polls



MJ AKBAR

BYLINE

The space for both Congress and BJP is shrinking, and they have only themselves to blame. The former has become strangely trapped in an economic philosophy imposed by a triumvirate that often seems more loyal to the World Bank than to the Indian voter. The BJP remains mired in a partition mindset. The Indian voter has two demands: economic justice and social cohesion. Both are essential if the Indian nation has to reach its own high standards of expectation. Political parties are no longer leading the voter forward; the voter is setting the standards for political success. The voter is more mature than the party, and that is excellent news.

middle of elections.

The legitimate polls also make money all around, since television ratings rise when exit and opinion polls are announced, which means lucrative advertising. We in the print media are the ultimate suckers, because we print these polls without even getting the advertising.

One presumes that the reputations of all highly-paid, self-professed opinion pollsters who predicted a hung Assembly in Uttar Pradesh are hanging from the nearest lamp-post, but I doubt it. This tribe's ability to rise from the grave is near-miraculous. They are helped by the fact that opinion polls now fall into two categories. Both make money. The first is unscrupulous. The crooks, fortunately, are few though not far between. They come to secret arrangements with politicians, massage the "research" to suit these funders and get the "results" broadcast for a fat fee which is distributed as necessary. Politicians pay because they continue to delude themselves that lies can create positive vibes in the

Exit polls are just that much more dangerous, since they purport to be more accurate. But utterly erroneous information is passed off repeatedly as credible. One example, that of the market leader in polls, will serve.

NDTV gave the Bahujan Samaj Party between 117 and 127 seats after its last exit poll. A three per cent margin of error either way is acceptable in such predictions. But to get the number wrong by 80 to 90 seats in an Assembly of 403 is breathtaking. At the other end of the electoral ladder, NDTV gave Congress between 35 and 45 seats. The Congress got half the higher estimate. NDTV must have been doing its research in some state other than Uttar Pradesh, or perhaps in some unwarranted state of mind. They projected the BJP as getting, with allies, between 108 and 118 seats. BJP president Rajnath Singh might today be strutting on all ten toes if his party had delivered what NDTV promised. In fact, its seats were less than half. Others were not much better: Star TV gave BJP a very precise 108 seats.

It is a terrible drop from inflation to deflation.

BJP and Congress claim to be national parties and, fuelled by dream merchants in Delhi, fantasise about a two-party system in which they are the only two parties. Let us check their status now in Uttar Pradesh. The BJP has only one MLA per one and a half district. The Congress has one MLA for every three districts. If you take the Rae Bareli and Amethi seats out, the average might get worse.

Both national parties played their aces. The BJP leadership distributed hate-Muslim CDs. The Congress put all its investment in the Family Charisma Bank. It is curious how elitist India accuses leaders like Mayawati and Mulayam of being "anti-modern" and "backward" when the real medieval politics is being done by BJP and Congress. Voters, both Hindu and Muslim, flocked towards the inclusive electoral strategy of Mayawati. The BJP and Congress did not even merit the limited joy of being runners up. "Maulana" Mulayam was an easy Number 2.

France elects Sarkozy: What lies ahead?

Sarkozy is definitely an outsider in French politics. He is the first son of an immigrant who has risen to the highest post of Presidency in a country still finding it difficult to integrate second generation immigrants. He is the grandson of a Sephardic Jew who converted to Roman Catholicism in a country still beset with anti-Semitic feelings. He is a graduate from France's state university system in a country traditionally ruled by technocrats trained in a handful of small, elite prestigious schools.

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

NICOLAS Sarkozy, 52-year-old right of the centre Conservative, had a decisive victory over his Socialist rival Segolene Royal in the second round of the French presidential elections last Sunday. He received 53 percent of the votes, compared to Royal's 47 percent. This resounding victory at the elections with a turnout of about 85%, has given the new French president a huge mandate and real authority. He takes over from President Chirac on May 16.

This victory also means that France has taken a definite step to the right, as Sarkozy had campaigned on a platform

based on restoration of national identity and rigor, pledging tough policing and anti-immigration measures, lower taxes and trimming of welfare benefits, less bureaucracy and better work ethics. Royal fought hard on the basis of traditional socialist proposals but she could hardly offer anything new to solve France's economic woes.

Consequently, the voters of the ultra-right parties, National Front and the strongly anti-Muslim MFP (Movement for France) and nearly half the voters of centrist candidate Bayrou's UDF, voted for Sarkozy. Even last week's television debate had little impact on Sunday's vote.

It was the third consecutive defeat

for the Socialists in the French Presidential elections and their main challenge should be to avoid recriminations. Some leadership changes are already in the offing. Former finance minister Dominique Strauss Kahn wants to take the party closer to the centre and he has already challenged party boss Holland and presidential candidate Segolene Royal. Perhaps the real leadership tussle would take place after the next month's parliament elections.

Centrist Bayrou's UDF would also like to capitalize their unexpected success at the first round of Presidential elections, by distancing themselves from the rightists to give a

new image to their party. Currently, Sarkozy's conservative party UMP has an overwhelming majority in the French Parliament and nothing can deter him from pushing through some of his sweeping economic and political reform programs through it. But experts believe that the wiser course would be to wait for the new Assembly as French voters traditionally give a strong parliamentary majority to newly-elected Presidents.

Sarkozy has also declared that he would be tough on crime and illegal immigration and has proposed the creation of a controversial new Ministry for immigration and national identity. He also stands for tougher sentences for juveniles. Foreign policy issues were of secondary importance in the campaign, but Sarkozy's been quite unabashedly pro-American. He openly expresses his admiration for the latter's work ethics and its belief in upward mobility. Naturally Washington was mighty pleased at his elections and President Bush was one of the first foreign leaders to congratulate him. Sarkozy is surely a welcome relief for them after Chirac who had openly

opposed the US-led Iraq invasion. Sarkozy, however, has made it abundantly clear that while America can count on the French support in hours of need, it must also acknowledge the fact that friends "can think differently." No major change in the French Iraq policy is likely; nonetheless, both sides would make a determined effort to improve their strained bilateral ties. Sarkozy, however, is a strong supporter of the Kyoto Protocol on Global warming which Bush continues to oppose and is firmly opposed to American ally Turkey's admission to the European Union.

Sarkozy is also a strong supporter of Israel. He has already declared that as president one of his foreign policy priorities would be to forge closer relationship with Tel Aviv, and that he would be far tougher on Hezbollah. France, due to historical reasons, enjoys special ties with the Muslim countries in the Middle East and North Africa, and it seems their existing policy would undergo significant adjustments.

France's most important European Union partners have warmly congratulated Sarkozy who promised to put France back into the driving seat of Europe after the country voted down the EU constitution in a referendum in 2005.

Sarkozy has been one of the most polarizing figures in the French politics and has been called arrogant, brutal and authoritarian by his opponents. His tough talk and no-nonsense approach inspire hope and fear. Hope, as he is prepared to take tough economic reforms which others were afraid to touch; fear as he might overstep his limits and thus invite a virulent backlash of the powerful workers' union and consequently civil unrest.

Sarkozy is definitely an outsider in French politics. He is the first son of an immigrant who has risen to the highest post of Presidency in a country still finding it difficult to integrate second generation immigrants. He is a graduate from France's state university system in a country traditionally ruled by technocrats trained in a handful of small, elite prestigious schools.

The biggest challenge for him is to unite the French people under his banner as he embarks on his important reform mission. He has a historic mandate and sweeping powers. Sarkozy's hitherto centrist opponent Bayrou has cautioned him that "absolute power can be a comfort ... as no one is there to oppose you," but "it also means no one is there to stop you from making mistakes -- when absolute power is mistaken, it is absolutely mistaken." Will Sarkozy heed to these words of caution and proceed with care and circumspection? Well, only time will tell.

Syed Muazzem Ali, a former Foreign Secretary, served as Bangladesh Ambassador to France from 1998-2001.