

Soul-searching in BNP welcome

Wholesale reform only way to save the beleaguered party

FIRST it was former education minister Osman Faruq who took issue with Begum Khaleda Zia's appointing her brother Saeed Iskander Vice-President of the BNP executive committee. With the murmur continuing against it, BNP chief is considering to retract and ask her brother to resign the post.

Then Dhaka Mayor Sadeq Hossain Khoka took a strident line suggesting reduction in the party chief's powers to take unilateral decisions. And now we have the most veteran BNP leader, former finance and planning minister Saifur Rahman voicing the need for ending family-centric politics and changing the party constitution to democratise the internal structure of BNP.

There has also been an open admission of mis-takes committed in the most crucial phase of our national politics in the recent months. The recital of fol-lies included extension of the retirement age of judges, refusal to accept justice Mahmudul Amin as the chief of caretaker government, appointment of president Iazuddin to head the caretaker government (CG) anti-ethical as it was to the very CG concept given that he was basically a party man and the appointment of jus-tice Aziz as CEC. The BNP's hell-bent insistence on pushing ahead with an election sans opposition participation knelt a death blow to any prospect for democratic reconciliation.

One couldn't agree more with Saifur Rahman's pinpointing the extension of judges' retirement age as the cardinal mistake because of the regressive chain of events it triggered. Even so, there were opportuni-ties presented to make a way out but none of these were availed of.

So the circumstances have forced a serious intro-spection in the BNP which if it had come about earlier on could have perhaps stemmed the tide of degeneracy the party fell pell-mell into. No voice of dissent was heard within the party in time to pull back from any impending mistake. So the detractors have their share of blame.

Essentially though there was a horrendous con-centration of power in one single person and despica-ble type of myopic irresponsibility characterising the exercise of that power. Little wonder, the admission of mistakes has come by way of a post-mortem. Now the BNP should be united in its resolve to reorganise the party along fully democratic lines to survive.

Violence in Karachi

Musharraf must read the writing on the wall

HERE is a clear need for President Pervez Musharraf to step back from the brink. After the violence which claimed no fewer than thirty four lives in Karachi on Saturday, it has become obvious how the military ruler and his supporters have pushed Pakistan to a crisis that can only add to the many afflictions it already suf-sers from. Among those afflictions is the absence of a democratic order, a situation brought about by Gen-eral Musharraf's coup of October 1999. In these past eight years, he has hung on to office through a resort to various measures, including of course the time worn method of influencing shifty politicians on to his side. A faction of the Muslim League holds power but by his leave. And now it appears that the ethnic-based Muttahida Qaumi Mahaz, people brought together by their common status as descendants of Urdu-speaking immigrants in the post-partition period, has taken to supporting Musharraf's cause, whatever that cause may be. It was the MQM which unleashed its followers on the roads of Karachi on fans of dismissed Chief Justice Iftekhar Muhammad Chaudhry.

The bloodletting on Saturday will be seen, for all the right rea-sons, as a further decline in the fortunes of Pakistan's military ruler. There is already a widely accepted sentiment that Musharraf dis-missed Chaudhry out of fear that the judge would block his moves for a fresh period in presidential office. On top of that, the per-sistent refusal by the president to doff his military uniform has con-tinued to ruffle feelings in Pakistan, to a point where people believe that his con-stituency remains the army and not the politicians who back him. That belief is not without reason. But far more important than the base on which General Musharraf operates is the fact that he refuses either to give up power or create the conditions which will lib-eralise the narrow parameters of politics he has put in place, clearly for his own benefit. In these past many weeks, increasing levels of authoritarianism have been demonstrated by the president, in marked contrast to the liberal, modern image he originally conveyed when he first seized power from a corrupt Nawaz Sharif government. He has gone after his opponents with frenzy. His move against the chief justice was a blatant attempt at creating a pliant judiciary.

It is time for President Musharraf to read the writing on the wall. The history of the rise and fall of mili-tary rulers in Pakistan ought to be a guide to what he can do to help himself and his coun-try out of the pre-sent crisis.

The ensuing race for White House



M ABDUL HAFIZ

PERSPECTIVES

Sadly, the election process in the United States has been corrupted by big money. Whoever pays the piper, calls the tune -- the saying goes. Although there are strict campaign finance laws in the books, the corporations and rich people always find ways around them. However, the election in the US is tainted by only one M -- money power, unlike in our clime where two Ms -- money and muscle power -- dominate the election.

campaign trails. There seems to be a long, long road ahead for all of them.

One obvious reason for the hurry is, of course, money. It is estimated that each candidate will spend \$1 billion on the presidential election this time. To raise this huge amount of money in order to stay in the race, one needs to do it better and quicker than others.

In the race to get in touch with the right people to get money, each of the candidates is desperately trying to outdo the others. It doesn't end there. Also, the quicker a candidate gets his or her act together, the brighter are the chances for media coverage -- another indispensable ingredient for success.

On the Democrat side, the supposed frontrunner for getting the party's nomination is New York Senator, Hillary Clinton. If she gets the nod, every presidential election

since 1980 will have had either a Clinton or a Bush as a presidential or vice-presidential candidate: George Bush senior, Bill Clinton, George W Bush and then Bill's better half (yet only South Asian politics is characterised or stigmatised as dynastic politics by Western commentators!).

Hillary is in the bizarre situation of having both, the advantage of having an incredibly famous and politically savvy hubby and the disadvantage of being associated with a controversial personality who is responsible for the proliferation of some of the raging problems, particularly in the Middle East.

One can also mention her draconian sanction in Iraq, and the undoing of the Oslo process through infamous second Camp David. In addition, a lot of people find Hillary herself harsh and cold. She is, however, a formidable candidate, and in

a recent opinion poll she was ahead of other candidates.

But Illinois Senator Barack Obama, an African-American, may make Hillary's path difficult. Obama's assets are his unique background of having a Kenyan father and white American mother, his charisma and, interestingly, his comparative lack of political experience.

If either Hillary or Obama wins the nomination, and subsequently the election, it will be historic. Because neither a woman nor an African-American has been ever elected to the highest office in the US.

Other candidates are trying to catch up with the duo, notably former North Carolina Senator, and John Kerry's 2004 vice-presidential running mate, John Edwards. He displayed a bit of the Kennedy touch in the election.

On the Republican side, there are two very interesting figures. Arizona Senator John McCain is a Vietnam veteran who spent more than five years in a Vietnamese prison. Thanks to his maverick political stance, he is more popular with the public than with the Republicans.

His main challenger is former New York city mayor, Rudolph Giuliani, whose major claim to fame is that he was in charge during the 9/11 Twin Tower disaster, and managed to convey an image of steadfastness and decisiveness. His arrogant disposition, however, neutralises these attributes.

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As a result, in the US the campaigns are often rapid, antiseptic exercises that are distinctly issue-free, with the 1996 Clinton-Bob Dole presidential face-off perhaps being the best recent example. On

the flipside however, none of the shenanigans that characterise elections in our part of the world are experienced. So, there is no election violence, no booth capturing, almost no voter intimidation, and no large-scale vote buying.

What, however, matters in a campaign in the US, and will again matter in the future, is the charm of the candidate rather than his party affiliation. Ronald Reagan's key to success was that he combined an avuncular folksiness with an impression of toughness. That was the major reason for which a lot of people voted for him, even when they disagreed with him on several issues.

Bill Clinton, perhaps the most charming and consummate political personality of his generation, carried the day in his own right, but failed to pass on the charm he possessed to his wife. If one of the prospective candidates can develop that charm during the course of his or her interaction with the public, the electoral politics of the great country will surely get back its luster.

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Some home truths on two ladies



ANM NURUL HAQUE

BY THE NUMBERS

If anything in the last five years put all of us to shame, it was the personal animosity and rivalry of these two ladies, whom the media across the world branded as the "Battling Begums." Very few people will disagree that we essentially need upright and uplifting leadership for getting out of the morass we are now in. The two ladies, who ruled the country successively for the past fifteen years, have had their chance in the musical chairs around the seat of power. Qualitative change in the leadership, a demand very close to everybody's heart, will remain a far cry if we miss the opportunity to cleanse politics.

she talked to all the guests. The AL chief, however, said that she was happy to be at the event, as she had been barred from it for the last five years. Both the leaders were found greeting other party leaders and exchanging pleasantries with them, while constantly avoiding each other.

Both the former prime minister Khaleda Zia and leader of the opposition Sheikh Hasina, spent tension-free days in foreign lands when the nation was groaning in agony caused by the political stalemate over the electoral reform issue. The people took it as cruel mockery that the two supreme leaders, who could have resolved the crisis by sitting face to face, appeared least concerned about the grave situation in the country, and were enjoying a nice vacation abroad.

The AL lawmakers led by Sheikh Hasina staged their comeback into the parliament on February 06, calling off their 19-month boycott. Khaleda Zia, being the leader of the House, deliberately absented herself from the House when the leader of the opposition Sheikh Hasina delivered her winding-up speech in

the concluding session of the 8th parliament on October 4. Sheikh Hasina had done the same thing when Khaleda Zia delivered her valedictory speech in the parliament.

A former World Bank executive, who had dealt with Bangladesh on many occasions, suggested throwing the two ladies into the Bay of Bengal for solving all the problems in the country (The Daily Star, May 9, Saga of the two ladies and beyond by Mamun Rashid). An overwhelming majority in the country, who are deeply frustrated and annoyed with the performance of these two intransigent ladies, are also crying out for enlightened leadership.

They have learnt, at high cost, that the competence of leadership must not be judged by blood or marital relationship with a leader deceased.

Khaleda Zia has welcomed Sheikh Hasina's homecoming. Certainly, this is a welcome gesture. But we clearly remember that Khaleda Zia, the then prime minister, did not visit Sudha Sadan to express her condolence to Sheikh Hasina who was injured in the dastardly grenade attacks on

August 21, 2004. Instead, she brought about the bizarre charge that the AL was trying to reap political dividends by destabilizing the country by carrying out grenade attacks on their own rally. Denying the truth instead of facing it fueled the raise of militancy in the country.

Political analysts in the country view this gesture by Khaleda Zia, welcoming Hasina's homecoming, as a tactic to induce AL to start a joint movement towards restoration of democratic rights. Analytical columnist and The Daily Star Assistant Editor, Zafar Sobhan, has very rightly termed it as "Khaleda's opportunistic greeting to Hasina, on the latter's return to the country."

I fully agree with the view expressed by Zafar, that nothing would be more harmful, both to the AL's interest and to those of the nation, than a collaborative movement with BNP in the present situation.

Really, "this isn't 1990," and common adversary cannot bring AL and BNP closer, if the AL has learnt any lesson from the past.

The Economist, the most widely circulated weekly across the world, published an article entitled "Ban-

gladesh: State of Denial" in its June 18, 2005 issue, with a cartoon of Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, suggesting a brawl between them. It is, in fact, the manifestation of the belligerent behaviour of our two supreme political leaders that has put the nation to lots of shame. But ironically, the leaders concerned are yet to sense this.

We can also cite lots of examples of cordial relationship between political rivals in our country.

Legendary leaders Bangabandhu and Moulana Bhashani maintained cordial relationship with political rivals all through their lives.

The intransigence of the two ladies makes matters worse in our conflicting democracy. Moreover, their oversized egos and quixotic whims virtually place them at daggers drawn. Eventually, it is the people who have to bear the brunt of their vindictiveness. Our political leaders also need to be remodeled, like political reforms.

If anything in the last five years put all of us to shame, it was the personal animosity and rivalry of these two ladies, whom the media across the world branded as the "Battling Begums." Very few people will disagree that we essentially need upright and uplifting leadership for getting out of the morass we are now in.

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ANM Nurul Haque is a columnist of The Daily Star.

India's own "crony capitalism"

PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

C RITICS of India's growth model here have long argued that it's based on a collusive business-government relationship and has produced terrible social imbalances.

On May Day, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh himself admitted this in an unusually reflective note. Speaking in Delhi, he said that he was "puzzled" by persistent regional imbalances and that most Indian businessmen operated in "oligopolistic markets" and in sectors where the government (gives) them special privileges."

Dr. Singh asked: "Are we encouraging crony capitalism? Is this a

necessary but transient phase in the development of modern capitalism? Are we doing enough to protect consumers and small businesses from its consequences?"

Dr. Singh's self-critical observation is welcome. He's right in saying, "we cannot depend only on a few large industrial houses and capitalists for driving our industrialisation..." His warning about "oligopolistic markets" is timely.

Yet, Dr. Singh seemed to be trying to pre-empt serious criticism of elitist policies, which would lead to their correction. His description of "cronyism" as a "necessary" phase in India's capitalist development gives it the ring of inevitability.

Cronyism has proved abiding for decades -- whether during the

Ore Co. to transfer its mining lease to POSCO. This is cronyism with a vengeance. Dr. Singh's discourse about cronyism, then, is a half-apology, mixed with a little regret -- a mere shrug of the shoulders.

No less important, the "cronyism" confession comes from a person who, with due respect, is himself a crony. Dr. Singh wouldn't have been appointed finance minister in 1991 without prior approval of international financial institutions (IFIs) like the World Bank and IMF.

Former Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, an intelligent but deeply cynical man, decided to obey the IFIs. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, he felt, Non-Aligned had no future; India must play the only game left -- neo-liberalism.

Dr. Singh has favoured Big Business in countless cases. Recently, he intervened on behalf of the Korean company, POSCO, which wants to build a giant steel plant in Orissa -- India's largest-ever foreign investment project (Rs 52,000 crores) in 1991-95, and then again under the United Progressive Alliance in 2004.

Dr. Singh has given POSCO 3,000 acres of forest land. He is pushing the state-owned Kudremukh Iron

powers by Planning Commission deputy chairman Ahluwalia, a hardened World Bank-IMF crony. The Commission has never been more powerful than it is today -- ironically, under anti-planning policies.

Mr. Ahluwalia decides everything -- whether the Northeast will develop or not, how many districts will Rural Employment Guarantee cover (without adequate funding), and whether primary schools will run.

Since 1991, the Indian state has mollycoddled business through massive tax breaks. Indian companies pay just 17% tax on their profits, less than one-half the rate in the West. No wonder, cars and air conditioners cost less in absolute rupees than they did 10 years ago -- inflation notwithstanding.

Crony capitalism's success is starkly evident in the growth of India's "high net-worth" individuals, whose disposable income exceeds \$1 million. Their number grew from 61,000 to 83,000 between 2003 and 2005. More shamefully, India has 3 of the world's top 20 billionaires, compared to the US's 5.

A glaring instance of today's cronyism is the appropriation of vast

world's fourth highest number of billionaires. The wealth of these 36 individuals equals one-fourth of India's GDP! India has 3 of the world's top 20 billionaires, compared to the US's 5.

At the other pole, there is steady accumulation of destitution, aggravated by dispossession and displacement. The neo-liberal years have seen the slowest rate of reduction in poverty. India's global human development rank is a miserable 126.

Indian growth is increasingly mal-distributed. Capitalism always builds on the best -- the most developed regions. SEZs will further aggravate disparities. So it's completely hypocritical of Dr. Singh to say he's "puzzled" by growing disparities. They follow directly from his own policies.

If he wants this to change, the UPA must tax the rich more, reinforce the debt duty, and launch an incomes policy, which sets upper limits on salaries and bonuses. It must also promote public investment in backward areas. Only then can cronyism be cured.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.