

New rank badges for service chiefs

Promotion in line with growth of armed forces

THE explanation given for the elevation of ranks of the chiefs of three services sounds eminently logical. Understandably, it is designed to boost the morale of the armed forces and create scope for vertical mobility of officials within the forces.

The conferment of the top ranks like that of the general, vice admiral and air vice marshal on the incumbents was long overdue when armed services of some South Asian countries with smaller forces have already adorned their chiefs with the ranks.

Much as we see the reason for their promotion and congratulate them on their assumption of new ranks, we have to say it would have been far more appropriate if it were to come through the hands of a political government.

Granted, political governments in the past have been blamed for partisan considerations in promoting, elevating and posting officials in government institutions, but that is the reason why we are looking forward to reformed political parties taking part in the next general election.

The image the army now enjoys for its unwavering commitment to democracy within the country and its support to the global peace initiatives is an asset for Bangladesh armed forces which they must strive to protect and enhance in their best interest.

They have had a positive role to play in thwarting an engineered election. They stood committed to upholding the constitution of the country through testing times. We also commend the army chiefs' unambiguous comments ruling out military takeover or army's involvement in politics. We have also noted that there was positive response to our protest at some initial attempts to muzzle the press. Corrective steps were taken. However, occasional attempts to interfere with our work remain, especially in the case of electronic media. This, we hope, will disappear soon.

It's our firm belief that if the army returns to barracks after timely and credible elections have been held which is what they have pledged to do, then their prestige will be further enhanced in the eye of the world. That is what the nation wants to see happen.

BDR in trade?

Let the normal market forces take charge

THE government in its anxiety to contain the price spiral has been employing all kinds of methods. Among them was opening of sale centres under the supervision of the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) at some areas in the capital and other places. These centres made commodities available at prices lower than that offered in conventional markets. In a further development, BDR has given a proposal to the government to import and distribute essential commodities in order to keep the prices under control during the month of Ramadan. The organisation has also expressed its interest in setting up retail sale centres under its direct supervision. And the caretaker government is learnt to have taken the proposal under consideration in a recent high profile meeting.

While we appreciate the caretaker government's concern at the galloping price, we at the same time cannot but say that BDR's proposal involvement is much more complex than selling of goods through some designated outlets in the city. BDR being a law and order agency is mandated to keep vigil at the borders. Ideally, such a force can step in on a temporary basis. But, when engaged in civilian duties on a long-term basis, questions of discipline, morality and order start to crop up. Such involvement would naturally be a major distraction by all means for a disciplined force.

This remains to be said that there are two proven ways to ensure normal supply and regulate the market of essential commodities. First, the vicious grip of the syndicate consisting of a few business houses has to be broken; and secondly, small and new traders have to be given credit and other incentives to step in. In hardly needs emphasising that if a law and order agency like BDR is allowed too much space in trading sector, it would send negative signals to the professional traders. Such measure cannot be sustained for long hence normal marketing forces will have to be allowed free play to attain a long-term solution. Here we may even suggest that the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh be revived with required logistics and manpower support so that it may import and supply essential goods to maintain the needed stability.

While these options are very much available, we believe the BDR proposal is a hasty one which must be rethought.

France's right turn and beyond



M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE French have just elected a new president in one of the most closely contested elections ever in France, where an estimated 85 percent of the electorate cast their votes. Nicolas Sarkozy, a right-winger of Hungarian origin, bagged 53 percent against his Socialist Party opponent Segolene Royal's 47 percent.

Notwithstanding her highly credible performance in the March 2 pre-election debate she lost, quite in keeping with the prevailing trend of ultra-right ascendancy on both sides of the Atlantic. With both the contenders being born after the second world war, the election represented a generational gap between current incumbent Jacques Chirac who is now 74, and Sarkozy who is 52.

Both in Washington and in London Sarkozy has been the hot favourite and the overwhelmingly

preferred choice, so that the arc of neoliberal pro-American influence is complete, with him clinching victory. Downing street, unsurprisingly, backed him, as did Silvio Berlusconi, Jose Maria Agner, Angela Merkel, George Bush and the like. Even the Tory leader David Cameron supported him despite personal differences.

The dominant political consensus appears to be that only the right can sort out the political problems of a country. The preferred choice, thus, is either a party of the right or -- as in the case of Tony Blair's government - a party of the left led by a leader of the right. It is, therefore, no surprise that neo-liberal economic thinking predominates. Tony Blair's New Labour, it may be recalled, enthusiastically embraced the central tenets of Thatcherism by jettisoning its socialist leftist legacy, although, of course, the country enjoyed a prolonged boom.

But it is rather harder to explain

the continuing attachment to Americanism at a time when US foreign policy stands discredited. Only two major European nations emerged with credit from the Iraq disaster, without sharing its ignominy. They were France and Germany, which had the courage to withstand the US administration and oppose the US-led invasion.

In 2003, France did the world a service by leading the opposition within the UN, and refusing to allow the body to be used as a tool for Anglo-American policy. It is an irony that the same France, with Sarkozy at the helm, will be under the American thumb.

More fundamentally, however, the choices facing European nations are not just reducible to two obvious issues of neo-liberalism and pro-US foreign policy. Such simplification displays a shriveled view of how politics and political choice have been debased in neo-liberal area. In late 2005, Sarkozy -- then

interior minister -- condemned the riots that broke out in the suburbs, where those of African and Arab origin were concentrated, in calculatedly inflammatory terms, displaying zero sympathy for the plight of the ethnic minorities or any willingness to understand their grievances.

The election 2007 in France has been a politically defining moment. Given his reputation as an anti-poor, anti-immigrant politician -- at the centre of Sarkozy's appeal has been race -- he didn't need to bang on about it because at that moment everyone, white and brown, knew where he stood.

As a result of Sarkozy's action he was already hated in the suburb. Under intense pressure, and amid tight security, he eventually visited one such suburb. The suburb, in response, registered and voted -- politically mobilised for the first time and in no doubt about what was at stake in this election.

One of the great themes of

post-war Europe has been immigration from the developing world. It has transformed almost exclusively white countries into multi-racial and multi-cultural societies. It has, no doubt, been traumatic and conflictual, but also liberating and educative.

Western Europe is increasingly becoming diversified -- especially France and Britain because of their colonial past. The process is inexorable. The ability of the societies of these two countries to embrace all races and cultures will be crucial to them for their future stability, security and success.

The alternative is the "Sarkozy route," which has all too many parallels elsewhere in Europe -- not least in the Netherlands: repression, ghettos, gated communities and rampant racism, as well as the exclusion of ethnic minorities from mainstream society -- a form of low-level civil war. Europe's challenges are, therefore, first, to build inclusive, multi-racial societies, and second, to adapt to a world where it is no longer a pre-eminent, but one of the many, centres, and a declining one at that.

The two are closely related. They are far more fundamental to Europe's future than whether or not Sarkozy liberates France's labour market. In the context of a multiracial society, Royal offers

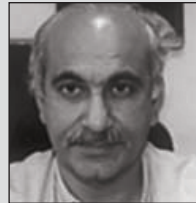
inclusivity and Sarkozy exclusivity. She respects diversity while he preaches nativism. On these grounds alone the choice could hardly be clearer.

For, all said and done, France is at the moment a divided country. It will take all of Sarkozy's skills, and so far unseen compassion, to unite the country. His problems will be compounded if his party fails to a gain majority in the parliamentary election due next month. If that happens it will lead to what is known as cohabitation with the prime minister coming from another party, and weakening the position of the president. This situation occurred several times in the past three decades.

During the campaign, Royal called her opponent "a dangerous leader." Although Sarkozy termed the allegation "outrageous," Royal's warning were not off the mark. The poor in the ghettos have not forgotten or forgiven Sarkozy's brutal policies, or his contemptuous attitude towards them during the riot last year. Sarkozy has, however, tried to placate those who fear that his presidency will be divisive and confrontational, promising to be the "president of all France." Yet, as an expression of outrage over his electoral triumph, the youth in the suburb engaged in fresh violence.

BYLINE

We are in Auckland for a conference on an Alliance of Civilisations, one of the worthy causes that the United Nations periodically takes up to keep the righteous engaged. Be that as it may, surely a pre-requisite for such a gathering is that the host must be civilised. Both New Zealand and her prime minister score top marks. They are neither coy nor cloying; the friendliness is just right. Helen Clark also understands that



MJ AKBAR

AUCKLAND takes its beauty for granted. A wondrous four-hue rainbow borrowed from a fairy tale rose gently from a small flurry of white clouds to the left, vaulted high towards the forehead of the sky and dipped with ever increasing power into the horizon, its colours pouring into the pot of gold resting below eyesight. If, as New Zealanders are fond of saying, this glorious island is the last stop of the bus, then the pot of gold is, as promised, at the end of a world flattened by globalisation. How many metaphors are mixed in that last sentence? Let someone with a flat mind count.

Our car turns a corner to change the street. The clouds darken, only to be brilliantly lit by the fluorescent light of the tail of my rainbow. I feel possessive because no one else seems interested: not children chatting on their way to school, not the cars hurrying off to work, not my fellow passengers in the car, who are discussing journalism, civilisation, and journalism. (How many contradictions have I juxtaposed by placing those three words beside one another?)

Our destination is the Hoani Waititi Marae, where the class of 2007 from the Auckland University of Technology media department has been brought to commune with the wisdom and spirit of the Maori people. My rainbow has preceded me, now dressed in the finery fit for an admirer from across the seven seas. It is perfect, adorned with a fourth purple layer, an imperial band that seals its majestic dominance of the firmament as it vaults with a motionless grace from precisely above the centre of the roof of the Marae to the edge of vision.

The Marae is an open hall with a sloping roof and the simplicity and quiet humanity of a mosque, the feeling reinforced by the need to remove one's shoes. A mosque is not the home of God, for God lives everywhere; it is the house of a community that comes to mingle and kneel in prayer before it disperses to a hundred homes. We cannot enter without the permission granted through a ritual prayer to nature, spirits, ancestors and the One who has given us the sensitivity to enjoy the wonders of life and the sense to survive its burdens. But once inside the space, you belong here forever.

There is never a need for a second welcome.

Outside on the lawns perfumed by the environment a gentle rain floats like overweight mist, reminding me of school, Shakespeare and Portia describing the quality of mercy to a businessman with a balance sheet in one hand and the law books in the other.

The star of the morning is the leader of the newly-formed Maori Party, which has seven seats in Parliament. His patter is a hit because, I suspect, he never repeats an audience. He only repeats the jokes. But he is funny. The Maori, like any minority with a powerful past and an injured present, display the chips on their shoulder like a general showing off his epaulettes. But one of the great achievements of the present New Zealand prime minister, Helen Clark, is the conviction with which she is making her nation an inclusive, ethnic-equal society. There is still ideology left, even if you have to go to the end of the world to find it.

A fact and a factor made me feel uncomfortable during my first hours in the country. The fact was the weather. A grey, monotonous drizzle made me nostalgic for

Indian sunshine. I knew that New Zealand had been recreated as a modern nation by British settlers, but did they have to bring British weather with them? What is the point of traveling across twelve time zones only to resettle under Scottish rain?

The factor was a man in the hotel. If the weather was wet, the receptionist at Langham Hotel was cold. He brusquely informed me that I would have to wait three hours before I could get a room. That is absolutely the last thing my stomach wants to hear after a very long overnight flight. I tried weaseling. He stopped a decimal point short of being rude and ordered me off. I slunk off defeated. I would have accepted defeat but the very pleasant lady behind me in queue, a bureaucrat from Oslo, was given a room without any fuss at all.

Was this race or gender bias?

I am pleased to report that by the evening both the weather and my mood had cleared. The rest of the staff of this splendid hotel have been as pleasant and friendly as all New Zealanders. The rough edges of political manipulation have been left behind on Australian beaches. Helen Clark has not been defeated for nearly

eight years but has begun to seem vulnerable, at least if the opinion polls in New Zealand are more accurate than the opinion polls in India. When defeat comes, as it must in any democracy, I suspect that she will have changed the political culture so much that a politician like Australia's neo-virulent John Howard could never get elected in her stead.

I write this in a Turkish kebab and coke shop on Queen's Street. The top of the street is dominated by Koreans and Japanese, the Northeasterners of Asia, as they are known here. Two young Korean men in blonde hair, knee-waist jeans and fancy-label plain white T-shirts calmly light up a weed that is not tobacco. The streets drift towards Friday-afternoon crowds, the familiar cluster of brand-name shops and small stores and restaurants that confirm the charms of variety. The sun is out, warming the fluctuating temperature of an autumn breeze. The foyer of the hotel looks cheerful. I have not seen that frigid receptionist for two days. I hope they've sacked him, but I fear he may merely be on leave.

Maoris dance with their fingers, which flutter as rapidly as the wings of a small bird. Women sway to the music and song of lilt and emotion, plaintive or happy, as if time moved outside the pace of life. Men suddenly jump out of this serenity. Their voice becomes guttural, and they thump their fleshy breasts as the rhythm switches into battle mode. A leader pumps men and music into battle mode. But anger is exhausting. Almost imperceptibly, the women return to the forefront, and

one is drawn, reassured, to that mesmerising peace of the fluttering hands below the hip.

We are in Auckland for a conference on an Alliance of Civilisations, one of the worthy causes that the United Nations periodically takes up to keep the righteous engaged. Be that as it may, surely a pre-requisite for such a gathering is that the host must be civilised. Both New Zealand and her prime minister score top marks. They are neither coy nor cloying; the friendliness is just right. Helen Clark also understands that alliance, like charity, begins at home. She starts her speeches in fluent Maori.

Dr. Allan Bell of the Auckland University of Technology, a reincarnation of Professor Henry Higgins, has been recording New Zealand's dialects for three decades. He has published evidence that his country may remain loyal to the Queen of England but is finally becoming independent of the Queen's English.

Radio and television broadcasters, who do so much to shape accents, once used to follow the BBC template. That was the definition of respectable standards. Now, New Zealand rules. Maori words like *iwi*, *mana*, and *whanau* have attained currency and it's no longer "fish and chips" but "fush and chups." "Bed" is out and "bid" is in. English was global long before globalisation. It flourishes because it is being nationalised everywhere. There are no discontents in its content.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

The Iranian nuclear knot

Iran's foreign policy is marked by expediency and not by principles. It quietly collaborated with Washington to get rid of Saddam of Iraq and Mollah Omar of Afghanistan. It did not hesitate to buy arms from Israel and the US (Iran-Contra affair) during the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988). But when it came to the nuclear issue, Iran had hardened its position. President Ahmedinejad has vowed not to step back from its ongoing nuclear program. Iran is surrounded by NWS -- Israel, Russia, Pakistan, India, China, and several US bases in the Persian Gulf. It will not be surprising that Iran eventually develops a nuclear weapon.

MAHMOOD HASAN

ON May 23, IAEA Director General Mohammed El Baradei sent the Report on Implementation of NPT Safeguards Agreement in Iran to the IAEA Board of Governors and the UNSC. The Report has not been made public. It will come up for consideration of the Board on June 11.

Meanwhile, some remarks of El Baradei have already ruffled feathers in Washington and Europe. At a press conference in Luxembourg on May 24, El Baradei said that he agreed with the CIA assessment that Iran is 3 to 8 years away from a nuclear weapon. Iran was capable of producing 3.5 percent to 5 per-

cent enriched uranium. To produce a weapon it would require technology, which can produce 90 percent and above enriched uranium.

He also said that "comprehensive dialogue" is the only way to keep Iran out of nuclear arms. Baradei said that Iran has expanded its enrichment program and that IAEA's knowledge of Iran's activities was shrinking. France and US have reacted strongly and said that these comments of El Baradei will undermine UNSC efforts to reign in Iran.

Iran is a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (came into force in March 1990), which is based on three main principles --

first, that none of the five Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) nor any non-NWS state shall proliferate nuclear weapons; second, that all signatory states shall adhere to disarmament and liquidate all nuclear weapons (some day); and third, states may use nuclear technology for peaceful purposes only. The question then arises -- where has Iran gone wrong? Why are the Western powers threatening Iran with all kinds of consequences?

Iran's nuclear program started under the Shah with American technology. The Germans built the Bushehr plant in the 1970s. Trouble started when Iran smuggled in centrifuges from Pakistan. It is not the principles of NPT that

Iran has violated. Iran is very much within its rights to use nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, and President Ahmedinejad has repeatedly reiterated this. Not reporting the enrichment program, which is required under the Additional Protocol of IAEA, was the violation.

The West saw this as a clandestine attempt by Iran to develop nuclear weapons. There is a weakness in the NPT. A state can develop technology for peaceful purposes, but can at the same time surreptitiously divert the enriched nuclear fuel for making weapons. In order to check clandestine use of enriched nuclear fuel, the IAEA can insist on tighter inspection regimes, including surprise visits to nuclear sites. This inspection on safeguard measures is known as the Additional Protocol.

Iran had signed the Additional Protocol under pressure from US, UK and France. IAEA says Iran has not been co-operating on the safeguard measures. The US has raised an uproar that Iran is up to something covert. Iran claims it has been complying with all IAEA

safeguards. Discontented the US sponsored three Security Council Resolutions, two of which have imposed limited sanctions:

- **Resolution 1696** (July 2006) demanded that Iran suspend uranium enrichment by 31 Aug 2006, or face economic sanctions.
- **Resolution 1737** (Dec 2006) imposed limited sanctions for failure to halt the enrichment program. The resolution related to total ban on all supplies to Iran related to nuclear technology.
- **Resolution 1747** (Mar 2007) prevents all parties to deal with Iranian State Bank Sepah and high-ranking officials engaged in the nuclear program.

In order to put psychological pressure on Iran the US dispatched the largest flotilla of war vessels to the Persian Gulf on May 23, 2007. Two aircraft carriers USS Nimitz and USS Stennis with 17,000 marines have been running war games, 30 km off the territorial waters of Iran. The US has made it clear time and again that it has "contingency plans" (euphemism for war) about Iran, but then it wants a diplomatic solution to the issue.

There are some stark similarities in the American allegations against Iran now, to those that Washington had made against Saddam Hussein just before the invasion of Iraq. Clearly, the two obvious objectives remain unchanged -- access to the oil fields of the Middle East and security of Israel. One should recall that President Ahmedinejad had called for obliteration of Israel from the face of the earth. (At least that was the translation rendered by the Western press).

The duplicity of the Western powers becomes more than evident when one compares certain parallels. The US is engaged in negotiations with India -- known as strategic partner -- to develop India's civilian nuclear capability. But when Iran says that it too shall use the enriched uranium for generating energy, it is rejected by the US.

When North Korea withdrew from the NPT and later exploded two nuclear devices in October 2006, the US did not send any flotilla to the Sea of Japan. It patiently went through the six-party talks and arrived at a negotiated settlement with N. Korea.

Military maneuvering near the Chinese borders to frighten N. Korea was not found very attractive by George Bush.

President Bush on May 25 again reiterated that US, with its allies, shall try to impose tougher sanction now and isolate Iran. The difficulty is that Russia and China think that sanctions will not deter Iran from its goals. Negotiations would be the right approach they say. The new conservative president of France Nicolas Sarkozy has already teamed up with George Bush on this issue. Britain's Blair has been on the US bandwagon from the very beginning.

The dangerous "Shia Crescent" spreads from South Lebanon (Hezbollah), through southern Syria, South Iraq's Basra region and into Iran. Was it not the Shia campaign that drove the American forces out of Lebanon in 1983-84. The Israeli campaign in Lebanon against Hezbollah in summer 2006 was a disaster.

US have accused Iran of abetting a proxy war in Iraq. Thus a "nuclear Iran" will be too dangerous for American interests in the region. While the US wants to

punish Iran for its nuclear program, it needs Iran to help it evolve an exit strategy from Iraq and has invited it to talks on Iraq on May 28 in Baghdad. It is a Catch-22 situation for Washington.

Iran's foreign policy is marked by expediency and not by principles. It quietly collaborated with Washington to get rid of Saddam of Iraq and Mollah Omar of Afghanistan. It did not hesitate to buy arms from Israel and the US (Iran-Contra affair) during the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988). But when it came to the nuclear issue, Iran had hardened its position.

President Ahmedinejad has vowed not to step back from its ongoing nuclear program. Iran is surrounded by NWS -- Israel, Russia, Pakistan, India, China, and several US bases in the Persian Gulf. It will not be surprising that Iran eventually develops a nuclear weapon.

The West will do well not to look for a casus belli and go for adventurism over Iran. The world will be relieved if this confrontation is resolved through negotiations, keeping in mind the legitimate interest of all the parties.

Mahmood Hasan is a former Ambassador and Secretary.