

The real problem with Pakistan



MOVIES usually tell a story powerfully, emotionally -- and simply. But "A Mighty Heart" is notable for the nuance it manages to convey. The 2002 murder of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl wasn't itself complicated: a group of jihadists kidnapped him and then brutally beheaded him. But its setting, Pakistan, is awash in grey tones, which the movie paints skillfully. To fully understand this story, we must recognise the utter ruthlessness of Pearl's killers but also the complexity of where they

came from. Now, with Pakistan undergoing its greatest crisis since 9/11, the United States would do well to take that complexity into account. There is a simple story line: Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf has abused his authority; he faces massive street protests and should be nudged out in favor of a civilian government. It's a tempting view. Musharraf is a dictator, and his regime has not been wholly committed to fighting Islamic radicals. The Taliban has reconstituted itself in Pakistan's tribal areas, and Al Qaeda's top leaders appear to be ensconced along its border. If there is a central front in the war on terror, it is not in Iraq but in Pakistan. Now, the complications. Musharraf has, on the whole, been a modernising force in Pakistan. When he took power in 1999, the country was racing toward ruin with economic stagnation, corruption, religious extremism and political chaos.

It had become a rogue state, allied to the Taliban and addicted to a large-scale terror operation against neighboring India. Musharraf restored order, broke with the Islamists and put in place the most modern and secular regime in three decades. Under him the economy has boomed, with growth last year at 8 per cent. Despite the grumblings of many coffeehouse intellectuals, Musharraf's approval ratings were consistently high -- around 60 per cent. Until recently, like many dictators, Musharraf has gone several steps too far. His recent actions -- dismissing the chief justice of the Supreme Court and attempting to change the Constitution so he could remain president and still run the Army -- were wrong and foolish. Though not unprecedented, Musharraf's predecessor, Nawaz Sharif, the elected prime minister, dismissed his chief justice in 1997 and tried to amend the Constitution in equally egregious

ways in 1999. But Musharraf failed to recognise that perhaps as a consequence of his success, ordinary Pakistanis were becoming less comfortable with military rule. As Indian commentator Shekhar Gupta has suggested, he would have been wiser to give up his uniform and run as a civilian in a free and fair election, which he would have won. The danger is not that radical Islamists would come to power if Musharraf goes -- as several American presidential candidates have claimed. Islamic fundamentalists have never gotten more than 10 per cent of the vote in Pakistan. The country's two main political parties are secular. The real problem in Pakistan is dysfunction. "A Mighty Heart" accurately shows that Pakistan's national police forces were trying to find Pearl's kidnappers. But the central government can claim only limited and divided authority over the country. Provincial governors, local

commanders and rich landlords are powers unto themselves. Elements in the government can drag their feet and subvert official policy. Large swaths of the country are badlands where the state's writ doesn't run. This is a far more backward country than South Korea or even the Philippines, where the United States helped usher in democracy in the 1980s. The only institution that works in Pakistan is the military. The Army is mostly professional and competent. It is also vast, swallowing up approximately 39 per cent of the government's budget. In a book published last month, author Ayesha Siddiqi details the vast holdings of Pakistan's "military economy" -- including banks, foundations, universities and companies worth as much as \$10 billion. And with or without Musharraf, as Daniel Markey ably explains in the current issue of Foreign Affairs, the military will continue to run

Pakistan's strategic policy. Deeply ingrained in the Army's psyche is the notion that it was abandoned by the United States in the 1990s, after the Soviets were driven out of Afghanistan. The generals are worried about Washington's warm overtures to India and fear that soon they will be abandoned again. One explanation for why the military has retained some ties to the Taliban is because they want to keep a "post-American" option to constrain what they see as a pro-Indian government in Kabul. If Washington were to dump Musharraf, the Pakistani military could easily sabotage American policy against Al Qaeda and throughout the region. Musharraf may be doomed -- though were he to choose between the presidency and his Army post, and reach out to the mainstream opposition, he might well survive. Still, it does the United States no good to be seen forcing him out. We can-



not achieve our goals -- or help Pakistan gain stability -- by turning our back on the military. Back in the 18th century, Frederick the Great's Prussia was characterized as "not a state with an army, but an army with a state." So it is with Pakistan. A complex reality.

Fareed Zakaria is Editor of Newsweek International.
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Where do we stand, and what we are heading for?

M. SHAH ALAM

IF the constitutional provision for a caretaker government (CTG) in Bangladesh is unique in the system of constitutional governments around the world, the extraordinary situation in which the present CTG came to power was also unique, and one which the constitution could not envisage. The formation of the present CTG headed by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed was preceded by the proclamation of emergency, strongly and effectively backed by the military. The prevailing situation on the eve of the proclamation of emergency led to apprehension of a military intervention of some sort, or even imposition of martial law. However, the military acted wisely, and martial law was not necessary. The constitution, the state of emergency, and the CTG, provided the military sufficient scope of action, and the military, in turn, provided protection to the constitution and

freedom to the CTG to work according to the constitution. In the context of the politicians taking the country to the brink of an abyss, the people at large lent unprecedented support to the proclamation of emergency and to the CTG. Popular support was spontaneous and overwhelming, the fact of military involvement notwithstanding. The popular support received a further boost from the CTG's declaration of its resolve to guarantee law and order, and its vow to create an appropriate atmosphere for holding free and fair elections as early as possible. The CTG, indeed, took practical measures to live up to its commitment. However, its huge agenda of reforms and scale of work cast doubts on its ability to hold general elections and hand over power to an elected government within a reasonably short period of time. The chief advisor's determined declaration, in his recent address to

the nation, to hold the elections within 2008 removed all doubts and speculations. Although some observers criticized the time-frame as being too long, we seem to have a clear and acceptable schedule and road map to elections. In the meantime, questions were raised about the constitutional validity, first, of the CTG beyond three months, and then of the state of emergency beyond four months from its proclamation. However, since elections could not be held within three months, for obvious reasons, and since there is no parliament, it was not difficult to defend the extended life of the CTG and the continuation of emergency. That the CTG has attained legitimacy from popular support, and from the constitution, is very clear. Legitimacy is not merely the outcome of legality and constitutionality, but of overwhelming political support of the people. Erosion of legitimacy will creep in only if the CTG takes an unduly long

time to accomplish the works it has undertaken. Can the time-frame announced by the chief advisor be kept? The question of maintenance of the schedule arises because of the CTG's larger, and increasing, agenda of reforms, and the massive drive against corruption perpetrated by the high-ups, specially of the immediate past government. The nation has been stunned and shocked by the scale and dimension of corruption. Many stalwarts of Awami League also have not being spared, and rightly so. The anti-corruption drive, per se, is necessary for healthy development of the nation, and also for rescuing the elections from the clutches of black-money. The anti-corruption drive has no apparent end. While it is highly laudable, limiting the drive only to the politicians, and to a selected few, may breed distrust. Arrests and detentions can be easy, but the process of prosecution and conviction, or acquittal, can be lengthy. What is imperative is adherence to due process. Will the time-frame allow the CTG to bring its anti-corruption drives to a logical and reasonable completion? Besides, any scope for thinking that the CTG is, seemingly, trying to keep a balance between the two major political parties in its arrest operations may, I am afraid, put a question mark on the credibility of the drive. Corruption ought to be weighed against its nature, scale and dimension. The most talked about topic now is political reforms. The talk mostly revolves around the reforms of the political parties. After the CTG's insistence, the parties themselves are talking about reforms. Is this a paradigm shift in the policy of the CTG? Is it going too far by telling the political parties how to reform themselves for free and fair elections? The answer is both, yes and no. Reforms are undoubtedly necessary. The CTG can definitely tell the

parties to reform, or even promulgate ordinances stipulating the conditions for formation and conduct of the political parties for the smooth functioning of democracy. This may relate to registration of the parties, funds-raising, participation in the elections, etc. But it ought not be concerned with who will lead the parties and how. This has to be decided by the parties themselves. The so called minus two formula is potentially fraught with risks and dangers for the nation. Cleaning the parties of corrupt personalities is one thing; interfering with party personalities to disrupt party foundation and functioning is another. The two major political parties, Awami League and BNP, based on differing political ideologies, have grown over the years and ruled the country at different times. Any third, fourth, or fifth force may emerge in the political scene. But deliberately promoting a third

force at the cost of the two major parties may be counter-productive for the country under the present circumstances. Strong political forces in the form of major political parties capable of running the country are an essential factor for the country's stability. Their weakening can lead to a political vacuum. A third force, in the short term, may prove incapable of filling the vacuum. A political vacuum is a dangerous situation. It can be filled up only by the military, which, it is believed, is not desired by the military itself. That would not be a civilised way of running after democracy. Military rule has never, and nowhere, been proved good in the long run. The CTG has, so far, done commendable work. The nation would not want to see them fail. They cannot afford to fail, because any failure would be catastrophic for the nation. The CTG, therefore, ought to take every step with utmost care. It is true, and understandable,

that the CTG would not like to see any force unfriendly toward its activities coming to power. On the other hand, it is also true that any party coming to power through fair and free elections would not be unfriendly toward the measures undertaken by the CTG, which enjoyed wide public support and ensured fair elections. All quarters agree that it is possible to create an atmosphere, and take the necessary steps, to hold free and fair elections and hand over power within the declared time-frame. Any delay would cause erosion of the legitimacy that the incumbent government enjoys. The mounting agenda of reforms, and reforms of the political parties not kept within limits, may cause delay in the time frame, and the road map to elections.

Dr. M. Shah Alam is a Professor, Faculty of Law, University of Chittagong.

How can they work wonders?

KAZI S.M. KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

REFORM is, no doubt, the most popular buzzword these days. Arguably, never before had calls for reforms gathered such momentum. However, civil society groups have long been campaigning for reforms to make our electoral process truly functional and productive. While there is no qualm in any quarter as to the urgency for reforms, the unfolding of drama resolving it has not always been wholesome -- though you might disagree -- since 1/11. Admittedly, the first round of the "minus two" formula ended in a fiasco. The second round has firmly set in. Truly, the two ladies had enjoyed unhindered freedom since 1991. However, Khaleda Zia enjoyed the luxury of power more, with her last stint in power being an absolute debacle in terms of quality of governance. Though they played significant roles in dislodging the military dictator Ershad in 1990, these very two ladies and their attitude towards



each other have been identified by many as stumbling blocks to our nascent democracy. Both of them, thus, deserve their share of criticism. However, to single them out is, I think, rough justice. I am sorry to say that such a rating might please many quarters, but the very essence of "truth"

suffers in the process. I mean to say that party leaders in both the camps could have dissuaded them from being so despotic. However, they were more focused on ensuring their share of the booty, rather than serving either the country or the party. However unsavoury it might



sound, most of them became champion opportunists at that time, only to curry favour with the party chiefs and their kith and kin. In the current environment, however, some leaders of both the camps are behaving as if they had to suffer a lot at the hands of their chiefs because of their "reformist" attitude. It is

unknown to very few that even senior BNP leaders cringed in front of Tarique Rahman to get little favours. Almost everybody admits the fact that there was gulf of difference between the BNP of 1991-1996 and the BNP of 2001-2006. There is no denying the fact that Mr. Tarique

Rahman was largely responsible for BNP's undoing in the last period. Far from being a leader of some reputation, he became a symbol of corruption. Far from advancing his father's deep-rooted position in Bangladesh's politics, he committed a sort of patricide by putting his father's party's political legacy on the line. Unfortunately, young people who had their visions tainted by the glamour of money flanked Tarique. They constantly exploited him, and contributed to his play with many sectors of the country. However, the veterans in the BNP did not play a positive role either. They used Tarique's passion for money to the greatest possible extent, instead of making any move for correcting him. Where was their sense of dignity then? Could they really not have survived without Tarique's mercy? I cannot remember anything that these leaders resorted to, to prevent Tarique from going down the drain. I need to make it categorical that my proposition is not to absolve Tarique and co. from the sins they committed against

the nation. Similarly, senior leaders of AL were afraid of speaking the truth before Hasina for fear of losing their positions. Many such leaders in both the camps are now crying hoarse for reforms in their parties. I have, however, little confidence that they can bring anything good to our political culture. My doubt is reinforced by the fact that these leaders seem to have been little interested in bringing about reforms of their own volition. But, presumably, pressure and only pressure -- you know from which direction -- has brought them to their knees. I believe -- again, however unsavoury it might sound -- that these people have opted to dance to the tune of the real controllers of the current state of affairs, either for more gains or for mere existence. I have little conviction that many of them will be able to go the distance, as their efforts lack the required amount of spontaneity. How long can one be propelled if one lacks originality? They might only be successful in muddying the water more. As, in their parties, they were happy to

approve of all the misdeeds of their party chiefs, so are they likely to play second fiddle to the ones who are willing to use them. These poor fellows seem to have nothing to say from their own perspectives, and do so only when dictated to by the power-mongers. Even if they can survive the initial tremors, gaining people's confidence might not be that easy. To my mind, their track records make it crystal clear that these leaders -- not all, but the ones who are reported to have amassed heaps of wealth, but are being shown leniency by the government in exchange for their service to the cause of reform -- have become so rusty that they are very unlikely to work wonders in bringing a truly reformed ambience in our politics.

Kazi S.M. Khasrul Alam Quddusi is Assistant Professor, Department of Public Administration, University of Chittagong.

Putin has upper hand

IMRAN KHALID

SINCE their very first summit in Slovenia in June 2001, when US President George W. Bush fervidly declared that he was "able to get a sense" of Russian President Putin's soul, the personal relations between the two have been dominating US-Russian relations to a large extent. During the last six years, this personal connection averted a number of potential collisions between the two countries. Despite having divergent views on the Iraq invasion and Iran's controversial nuclear programme, as well as on the Palestine issue, the situation never went to the extent of a direct confrontation. However, at the start of this year, the tension between Washington and Moscow over the US plan to

build a missile defence shield in central Europe suddenly reached new heights -- even to the extent of compelling political analysts to start discussing the resumption of the cold war. Suddenly, US-Russia relations were at their the lowest in the post-cold war period. Ostensibly, the credit for this tense situation went to the policy-makers in the Pentagon, who wanted to station 10 interceptor missiles in Poland and a targeting radar in the Czech republic, countries that lie close to the Russian border and, during the Cold War, were under the Soviet control. The apparent objective of this missile shield project, as propagated by the Pentagon, was to protect against any missile attack from terrorists and "rogue" states,

particularly Iran and North Korea. Despite the Americans' consistent assertions that the missile shield was not directed against Russia, the Putin camp started fiercely opposing this proposal with clear warnings of a retaliatory action plan. The situation almost reached the point of a direct, personal clash between Bush and Putin and, just before this month's G8 summit in Heiligendamm (Germany), political pundits were expecting further deterioration in the relations between the two sides. But, with a clever stroke, President Putin has changed the whole scenario and put the Americans on the back foot. During his one-to-one meeting with President Bush on the sidelines of

the Group of Eight summit, Vladimir Putin offered the United States the use of a Russian radar station in Azerbaijan, a former Soviet satellite on the Iranian border, as a part of the planned missile defence system in Europe. The offer for joint usage of the rented Gabalin base in Azerbaijan was a startling proposal that caught President Bush and political observers by surprise. President Putin argued that a joint US-Russia base at Gabalin would provide cover to all of Europe rather than just parts of it, and that any missile debris would fall in the ocean rather than on land in Europe. The stunned Bush had no immediate answer to this offer except labelling it as "interesting," and proposing

that experts from the two countries should examine it before starting a formal debate on it. "As a result of our discussions we both agreed to have a strategic dialogue, an opportunity to share ideas and concerns between our state departments, defence departments and military people," is how President Bush commented after his meeting with his Russian counterpart. The spontaneity of Putin's offer practically put President Bush in a very difficult situation, and he appeared clueless on how to react to such a comprehensive offer that apparently addressed all the concerns being propagated by him in favour of the proposed missile shield system in Europe. By offering this proposal,

President Putin has achieved two objectives. One, it has successfully defused the impending crisis between the two sides, and put President Bush in a defensive position on the question of a missile shield system. For the time being, until the military experts prepare the viability report on the proposal of a joint US-Russia base in Azerbaijan, the Bush camp will be psychologically bound to refrain from making noises over the issue. And secondly, it has provided an opportunity to President Putin to rally popular support at home, in advance of the parliamentary and presidential elections in December and March respectively. President Bush's agreement to review and consider this proposal

could have been interpreted in Russia as a sign of Putin's renewed strength and stature as a world leader, at par with his American counterpart. In fact, President Putin has shrewdly used the whole missile shield episode to his advantage. In the first place, he kept on augmenting and ballooning up the missile shield system as a threat to Russian security, to the extent of threatening the revival of the cold war. And then, on the occasion of the G8 summit, where the richest global players were present, he suddenly muffled President Bush by making a surprise offer of joint US-Russia radar base. Ostensibly, Putin now has the upper hand in the on-going missile

shield controversy, and Bush must be desperately trying to find a face-saving formula. Both leaders are supposed to meet again in early July, in a much more relaxed setting of the Bush family home at Kennebunkport in Maine, and there will be sufficient time for the two to agree on something "concrete" before leaving the stage next year. But, in this regard, President Bush must be looking forward to a helping hand from President Putin, who is riding high on the new-found wave of ecstasy after the G8 summit. Dr. Imran Khalid is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.