

# Tony Blair goes into twilight

*Brown will emphasise his own brand of leadership*

THE old order has, somewhat, given place to the new in Britain. Tony Blair's departure from office after a decade of providing leadership to the country has in turn given Gordon Brown his chance, at long last, of stamping his own authority on British politics. While it can be said that Brown has succeeded Blair and now plans to effect change in the way the country is run, it is also true that a change of prime ministers in the present context is essentially a sign of continuity. That is because Blair and Brown have together been responsible for the changes that have come over Britain in the years since the Labour Party, in its new avatar as New Labour, stormed to power in 1997. It will, therefore, be quite logical to believe that Brown's stewardship of the country cannot be much different from the way Blair ran things in his time.

For all the talk of whether or not a Browните Britain will be any different from a Blairite one, there remains the matter of what legacy Tony Blair leaves behind. He started off in a blaze of glory in 1997, having earlier with Brown reformed the Labour Party enough to make it electable after eighteen years of Tory rule. In these ten years, the economy has not only remained stable but has demonstrated ever-increasing signs of strength. Blair's emphases on the National Health Service and education have redrawn governmental priorities in domestic policy-making. On the question of Northern Ireland, the agreement between the feuding sides almost at the end of the Blair prime ministership will in future be cited as one of the more positive of the former leader's achievements in office. It is, however, Iraq that will continue to cast a long, lingering cloud on the Blair reputation. His extreme closeness to the Bush administration almost to the point of loyalty to it has surely dented his appeal. For a man who has always been in need of a place in history, Blair's misadventure in Iraq is the blot that has probably prevented him from getting a perch on the level of greatness. Whether his new role as the Quartet envoy for the Middle East will make any difference remains to be seen.

For Prime Minister Brown, therefore, the imperatives are obvious. His handling of the economy, having been strong, will remain that way. In foreign policy, though, he will be tempted to set a course that will mark him out from his predecessor. Like Blair, Brown is an Atlanticist. Unlike Blair, however, he will not be expected to toe the Americans unquestioningly. But Brown need not worry. He takes the top job at a time when America prepares to elect a new president in November 2008. An ambitious politician, he will have no second thoughts about making his own mark on his country and on the world at large. We wish him well.

## Trouble in Birdem

*Durable solution needed*

THE striking doctors at Birdem have withdrawn their strike, resorted to since Monday, until June 30 allowing the authorities a leeway to meet the demands for regularisation of their contractual jobs and uniform service rules for all employees. The doctors have said that their future course of action would depend on the outcome of the June 30 meeting with the authorities.

We would like to hope that normalcy will return to the country's specialised hospital after satisfactory resolution of the differences thereby ending untold suffering of the patients.

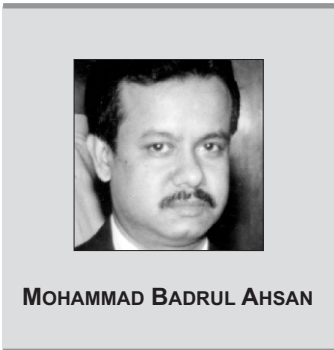
It transpires from various reports that the stifling situation was created when a notice was hung on the hospital wall stating that contractual appointments will not be renewed any further. The doctors were given contractual appointments over a period of almost 15 years and their services got renewed in three-year cycles.

The emergency doctors had stopped referring patients for admission thereby forcing the latter to either go back home or seek admission in some other hospital. And the matter took a turn for the worse when the resident physicians and surgeons of the out-patient department extended their support to the striking doctors.

We understand, the aggrieved persons are highly qualified doctors who have been working in the same hospital for a number of years. Therefore, any major decision with regard to their career should have been taken in consultation with them or their representatives. The abrupt action should have been avoided.

To uphold the reputation that the hospital has enjoyed over time and in consideration of the suffering of the patients, we urge the Birdem authorities to aim for a durable settlement with the striking doctors at the earliest. All parties concerned must realise that in medical profession service comes before everything else.

# Minus them all



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

AS the reform controversy is gaining momentum, it is beginning to look like an exercise in numeration. We are talking about minus two, minus three and minus more, while the real issue is subsiding in this clamor.

I agree with those who have argued that the reform shouldn't be treated like a formula. Minus the head of a political party will not suffice. Reform should run deeper and it should be done the way we would fight a viral attack. We should go after and destroy the last layer of contamination.

The first question is whether the reform is about new beginning or giving a second chance. The rule of thumb is clear of course. The political parties will not be allowed to do it in the old-fashioned way and they must be pluralistic, accountable and

CROSS TALK

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transparent.

But whatever we do, we are not going to run correctional centers for political delinquents. This reform is not about rehabilitating failed politicians. That includes the heads of the major political parties, who pushed this country to the brink of disaster.

They may not realize that for more than one reason, they are no longer fit to lead this nation. If they are charged and convicted, it will make their removal obvious. If not, there is enough reason why they should not consider staying at the helm.

What about the second line of leadership who sucked up to their party bosses? All these years they clung to power and took advantage. Some of them are already in jail and likely to be indicted in due course.

There are others who are still floating around, busybodies pushing reform on the double. Their best hope is that the joint forces will forget

to pick them up if they show enough enthusiasm for the reform. Let us call them the opportunists and leave them for a while to marinate in our imagination.

Meanwhile, the bad news is that the two top leaders of the top two political parties are still under the illusion that they are in a position to call the shots. It is the height of political hubris that, while they should be smitten by shame and guilt, they still consider themselves worthy leaders who should influence party decisions in their typical style and hauteur. Perhaps a good piece of advice to them is to relinquish their posts. The reform should leave no room for leaders who have let us down.

Those who are in jail and if charges are proven against them, they should be dropped from their parties like hot potatoes. One of the salient features of reform should be

that a convicted criminal who has served time for any period of time ought not to get party membership, let alone party position or nomination to contest elections. Such people shouldn't be allowed to work for the party and even to make campaign contributions.

Now let us go back to the opportunists who are behaving like the third yearling prancing around the mother goat. How many of them are clean? How many of them have not made money when their parties were in power? It is double standard if they hated the loot but kept the booty. The reform should screen them at the gate.

That makes us turn to the Anti-Corruption Commission. We should know the names of all the suspects, so that everyone is alerted as to who should not enter the new politics. This is necessary because it will be difficult to remove them afterwards.

# Back to the stone age

Most of the new refugees are fully aware that by leaving Gaza they are almost certainly doing harm to the territory's prospects, as well as the cause of Palestinian nationalism. "We're fighting for the right-of-return," says 34-year-old Khalil Safadi, another asylum seeker now in Norway. "Imagine this -- and now look what we're doing! I feel so ashamed. I cheated my country." Still, he has no plans to go back to Gaza. "I will learn Norwegian very easily," he says.

## KAVIN PERAINO

SANA Dahman only dared peek out her window at night. The men with guns in the street looked like shadows. In the glow of the flames from the burning city, she could see grenade tubes on shoulders and ski masks on faces.

Her neighborhood, like the rest of Gaza City, smelled like smoke. She was trapped in her house and food was running low. A friend tossed a loaf of bread through her window and then dashed away. Before the power failed for the night, she typed Hotmail instant messages to her husband: they're assassinating people. They're burning houses. We can't sleep.

Her husband, Mohammad Dahman, moved to Norway six months ago. He says he's never coming back to Gaza. Both Dahmans had been raised in Gaza's refugee camps, alongside roughly 1 million other Palestinians.

After college, where Mohammad studied business management, he took a job as a trade-union leader and human-rights activist. His \$700-per-month salary let the couple and their five children eventually move to a red-roofed condo with a balcony overlooking the sea.

But after the Islamists in Hamas won power 18 months ago, Mohammad decided he couldn't stay. "He started feeling like a stranger," says Sana. "I'm glad he's out." She and the kids are still waiting for their Norwegian visas. In the meantime, she says, "I'm losing my mind."

All Gaza seemed to be losing its mind last week, as legions of Hamas fighters fanned out across the 25-mile strip of sand along the Mediterranean coast. By Friday the Islamists had seized control over almost the entire

territory, storming the police and intelligence complexes that were once the most powerful symbols of Yasir Arafat's secular Fatah party.

Masked gunmen threw one another off high-rises, executed rivals at close range and torched party compounds. More than 90 Gazans died and dozens more were wounded. For the Islamists, the conquest seemed a natural denouement to their surprise election victory last year.

"The era of justice and Islamic rule has arrived," crowed Islam Shahawan, a Hamas military-wing official. Fatah leaders were despondent. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas called the fighting "madness" before disbanding the government and declaring a state of emergency.

The rapid reversal of fortunes for Abbas's forces in Gaza poses tough new dilemmas for US policymakers. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice tried to cast events in a positive light, noting that the United States could now openly support the Fatah-led government based in the West Bank.

Abbas smartly appointed former Finance minister Salam Fayyad, a technocrat well liked in Washington, as interim prime minister. (Reached the day before his appointment, Fayyad sounded harried and emotional. "I'm really disoriented right now," he said.)

But picking sides hasn't worked so well thus far. After Hamas's electoral wins, the United States and other Western countries cut aid money to the Palestinian government, instead funneling resources directly to Abbas's office.

Some observers accuse Washington of baldly encouraging

rivalry between the two camps. In a confidential report leaked last week, United Nations envoy Alvaro de Soto wrote that "the US clearly pushed for a confrontation between Fatah and Hamas." De Soto recounts listening to a US official declare "I like this violence" twice at an envoys' meeting in Washington recently.

"The US fanned the flames of this internal Palestinian conflict," says Haim Malka of Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack dismissed de Soto's remarks as "the views of an individual."

What seems certain is that Hamas-run Gaza is doomed to greater isolation and misery. With the Islamists in control, Israel may intensify its campaign of airstrikes on Hamas rocket teams and other militants.

Some Israeli analysts point out that a strong Hamas leadership in Gaza could have its advantages; at least someone would be in control there. But that is a minority view. "There's no common ground (with Hamas)," says Ephraim Sneh, Israel's deputy Defense minister. Dialogue, he says, is almost certainly a nonstarter. "Listen to them, for God's sake!" he says. "Gaza will be worse than Mogadishu. Our Apache (helicopter gunships) will talk to them."

It is no wonder, then, that so many Palestinians like the Dahmans are trying to get out. Over the past year, thousands of Gazans have fled to Europe, Canada and Arab capitals like Cairo and Amman.

In the past 12 months, 88,320 people have left Gaza for Egypt through the Rafah crossing, and only 76,176 have come in -- a net loss of

some 12,000 people. Many more would leave if they could. Ahmad Hanun, the director of the Sharni research center in Ramallah, says roughly 45,000 Palestinians applied to emigrate from Gaza and the West Bank in 2006. A travel agent in Gaza City, who didn't want to be identified for safety reasons, says he takes 50 calls each day from Gazans trying to wangle fake visa papers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the vast majority of those who manage to escape are the young, wealthy and well educated. Many of those who are leaving are technocrat types who work for organizations like the United Nations and foreign NGOs with global reach.

Khaled Abdel Shafi, the director of the United Nations Development Program's Gaza office, says he recently lost 10 percent of his employees, including many of the best. He says another 10 percent are trying to go, but can't get visas. "The big brains are leaving Gaza," says Sana Dahman. "We're going back to the stone age."

The irony is that the bulk of Gaza's 1.4 million residents are already from refugee families, mostly from Israel's 1948 War of Independence. Israeli historian Benny Morris, author of the seminal "Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem," says that a similar brain drain preceded that conflict.

"The well educated fled first," says Morris. "It left the vast majority of the population leaderless." When fighting broke out, Palestinians "didn't have anyone to say 'Stay'," he says. "They were like chickens without heads." Some 700,000 Palestinians ended up fleeing or being driven from their homes, a quarter million of them to neighboring countries.

Now, with Gaza exploding into violence, even the United Nations-operated refugee camps have become unsafe. Militants have stormed several of the food-distribution centers run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), searching for high ground as the fighting raged.

Two UNRWA workers were shot to death during gun battles, and two

By that time they will exert sufficient clout in the new set up and might be able to thwart off any bid to exclude them. Besides, the renewed struggle to unseat them will reopen the wound and might even become a drag on the next election.

It is important that this reform should be conducted in the full panoply of a revolution. It should infuse fresh blood into the system, new faces into the political arena, new thoughts, new values, and an altogether new campaign. And this should be done with utmost caution. The remains of the decadent era must not seep into the rocks of new dawn.

In so much as the political parties have the right to choose their leaders, the Election Commission can help by enforcing their qualifications. Anyone who may have been tainted by corruption, who may have taken advantage of power in any of the previous governments, defaulted on bank loans, acquired unexplained wealth, cheated on taxes, subverted laws of the land, or has been simply good for nothing, should not become a leader. No matter how popular he or she might be with the party cadres. Time has come for our politicians to graduate from fiery demagogues to furious leaders.

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old political parties will stay, but the leadership must change. The top two leaders and their second line should step aside as their last favor to this nation. The reform will be deformed should they still push their own agenda and resist change.

This is an acid test for Bangladesh. We missed our first chance in 1971. We missed the second in 1990. This is our third chance, and if we are counting anything, this is what we ought to be counting now. Minus one, minus two, minus as many as needed. But this time we can't afford to fail. It must work.

The good signs are already there. It is breaking political parties, breaking alliances, breaking families and breaking friendships. So be it. You don't make an omelet, if you don't break a few eggs. Let the old crumble and the new fumble but the march of change must go on.

When a revolution fails, it devours its own children. But the failure of reform can be worse. It mauls and leaves everyone badly wounded. Then history does its own minuses, and brings more pain.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

twice Gaza's per capita income.

He says most of his clients are students who manage to raise the money from their extended families. "They know it's an investment," he explains. He says his business has almost doubled in the past three months.

Middle-class businessmen have other ways out. Mahmoud Ismail, a 46-year-old entrepreneur originally from the village of Deir al-Balah, left Gaza three months ago and moved to Cairo. He closed his Gaza potato-chip factory, which he says lost \$12,000 in 2006, after it was repeatedly robbed and burned. Then he managed to get an Egyptian work visa by promising to invest \$240,000 in a new factory in the Egyptian capital.

For now his wife and four children are still stuck in Gaza; the Rafah crossing is closed, as it was for 271 days in the past year. He plans to get them out as soon as the border opens. "If you have money, you move out," he says. "If not, you're stuck. That country doesn't deserve me."

Most of the new refugees are fully aware that by leaving Gaza they are almost certainly doing harm to the territory's prospects, as well as the cause of Palestinian nationalism. "We're fighting for the right-of-return," says 34-year-old Khalil Safadi, another asylum seeker now in Norway. "Imagine this -- and now look what we're doing! I feel so ashamed. I cheated my country." Still, he has no plans to go back to Gaza. "I will learn Norwegian very easily," he says.

Sana Dahman hopes she'll get that chance, too. As she waits in the dark of her house in Gaza she can hear the crackle of gunfire outside. She says she often bursts into tears. She has stopped combing her hair.

"Gaza is in a hellish mood," she says quietly. "It's an extreme form of sickness. We have lost our brains." In a Gaza gone mad, the only sane thing now, she believes, is to get the hell out.

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# Tony Blair's leadership

What is for certain is that Tony Blair has transformed the Labour Party into a credible political party that has won three general elections in a row. This is to his credit, and that should be his legacy. I hope that Tony Blair becomes an envoy to the Middle East, and applies the principles he followed in Northern Ireland, to bring about peace in the Middle East. Only then can he remove the stain of the failed Iraq strategy.

## HASAN ALI IMAM

BRITISH Prime Minister, Tony Blair, will be resigning from his post soon. During the past week, the media's spotlight has been on his leadership over the last decade, his achievements and his failings.

As a member of the opposite party (Conservative), I had campaigned against his policies and his party throughout the past 12 years, but, for now, let me apply the brakes on party politics and give a non-partisan view of Blair's premiership.

When I helped a Conservative MP to retain his seat in the 1997 general election, we both knew that we were facing the greatest defeat in Conservative history. Tony Blair was a shining star of the Labour

Party, young, vibrant and dynamic. He was personable, and connected with people.

I met him in 1997 at one of his meetings, where he was delivering a speech on education. I bought one of his books, New Britain -- My Vision of a Young Country, which he kindly signed for me. I particularly liked the chapter, "Why I am a Christian," where he espoused his beliefs in Christianity, where mercy and peace were its central themes and his guiding principles in daily life. In an era of rising secularism and disdain for religion, it was refreshing to hear a powerful leader speak his mind on a taboo subject.

Labour had been in opposition for 18 years, and Blair's charismatic leadership transformed his stagnant party into a sophisticated,

slick, election-fighting machine. He managed to do away with some of the old socialist policies, such as re-nationalisation, and encouraged positive engagement with the private sector. This was a major milestone in his leadership, i.e. he could detach his party from a core socialist principle.

Blair's influencing skills had never been a problem, and Labour realised that they needed to change and get back into government, so they gave Tony Blair their full backing. Labour was re-branded to "New Labour," and they were out to hunt us Conservatives in full force.

It was a shock to the system when our party was defeated in 1997, but the British public had had enough, and did not forgive the outgoing Conservative Prime

Minister, John Major, for putting the British economy into recession in the early 1990s. However, by 1997, the economy was in good shape, and Labour inherited a golden economic legacy from us, which they could build on.

Some of the good things that Blair had done were to separate the Bank of England from the ministry so that there was no political interference. He also built on John Major's success with Northern Ireland and helped to bring about peace between warring parties. Under his leadership the IRA laid down their weapons once and for all, after they realised that the bullet could not change people's opinions.

Tony Blair was the first British prime minister to win three general elections consecutively, and this is a testament to his amiable personality, and the influence he was able to command within his party and the general public, even though some of his policies were unpopular. Being the longest serving prime minister, he saw through 4 changes in the Conservative leadership, a fact which he kept on reminding the Conservatives during Prime

Minister's Question Time.

Britain and the global community will remember Blair for his dynamic leadership, but will also remember him for taking us into war with Iraq despite the controversies surrounding this decision. He was labelled as a poodle of President Bush because his government supported Bush to the hilt in the war against terror.

It is difficult to judge whether the failed Iraq initiative will be his lasting legacy, or will it be the peace he was able to achieve in Northern Ireland. I leave that to future historians to decide.

What is for certain is that Tony Blair has transformed the Labour Party into a credible political party that has won three general elections in a row. This is to his credit, and that should be his legacy. I hope that Tony Blair becomes an envoy to the Middle East, and applies the principles he followed in Northern Ireland, to bring about peace in the Middle East. Only then can he remove the stain of the failed Iraq strategy.

As he steps down, the finance minister, Gordon Brown, will take

over the premiership. The question now is whether Brown can live up to the high standards set by his predecessor. Time will tell, but I don't believe that Brown has anywhere near the charisma that Blair had. He faces another challenge, which John Major faced a decade ago.

Brown has to contend with a resurgent Conservative Party under the leadership of David Cameron, who has been described as the "new Tony Blair." Cameron clearly has the charisma, dynamism and ability to connect with people.

After seeing through 4 Conservative leaders over the last 10 years, I am glad that we now have a dynamic and straight-talking leader at par with Tony Blair. We never had problems with policies, we only had one problem, and that was our image. This has now been rectified.

Building on the foundations set by previous Conservative leaders, David Cameron is transforming our party and taking it to new heights. I hope to see him as prime minister very soon. There are rumours that Gordon Brown may call a snap



general election next year. If this is true, then bring it on ... we

Conservatives are ready.

Hasan Ali Imam is a member of the Conservative Party, UK.