

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 Brownite 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.

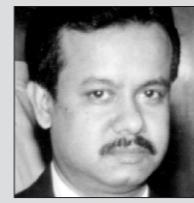
It transpires from various reports that the stifling situation was created when a notice was hung on the hospital wall stating that contractual appointments will not be renewed any further. The doctors were given contractual appointments over a period of almost 15 years and their services got renewed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

CROSS TALK

The reform initiative is not about old wine in new bottle. At best we can accept new wine in old bottle. The 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.

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 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.

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 steep 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 the 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.

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 envoy's 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

12,144 people.

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some 12,000 people. Many more would leave if they could. Ahmad Hanun, the director of the Shaml 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 Abdu 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

more were wounded. As a result, the agency announced it would temporarily suspend service at most of its Gaza health clinics and food-distribution centers.

Refugees contacted by Newsweek said they expected to run out of food within days. "If they don't get our food, they don't have food," says John Ging, UNRWA's director of Gaza operations. "We are their last resort."

Gaza was already on the verge of a humanitarian crisis even before the latest round of fighting. Unemployment runs at about 50 percent in good times, and has shot up since Hamas took power.

Top "industries," according to the CIA World Factbook, include "olive-wood carvings" and "mother-of-pearl souvenirs." Once Israel began with holding roughly \$55 million each month in Palestinian customs receipts, leaders were forced to stop paying government salaries altogether.

According to a March IMF-World Bank report, real GDP fell between 5 and 10 percent in 2006 -- almost 40 percent below its 1999 level. The result: "a hollowing out of the Palestinian economy," according to the study.

Nearby countries like Jordan and Lebanon, which already host 1.8 million and 400,000 Palestinian refugees respectively, are not eager to take in more. Both have had to deal with their own recent problems with Islamists.

"Jordan certainly doesn't want to see Palestinian politics spilling over into its terrain," says Nicholas Pelham, an analyst with the International Crisis Group. "Both (Egypt and Jordan) will put their own survival ahead of the humanitarian crisis."

The Gazans most likely to escape, then, will be those with means and connections -- the ones Gaza can least afford to lose. One black-market dealer of fake visa papers in Gaza City, who didn't want to be identified in order to stay out of jail, told Newsweek that he could procure a phony borderless Europe "Schengen" visa for \$2,000 -- roughly

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.