

'Limited' indoor politics on the anvil

EC's engagement with politicians is crucial

LAW and Information Adviser Mainul Hosein has spoken of a possible allowing of indoor politics on a limited scale. While such an expression of view, clearly made on behalf of the government, does generate a certain degree of public interest, it also raises the question of what precisely is meant by indoor politics on a limited scale. The reality at present is that politics on the whole has been kept in abeyance since January. It can be restored up to a point when the ban on indoor politics is lifted. In terms of semantics, therefore, limited indoor politics sounds rather ambivalent, which is why an elaboration from the government will be helpful.

Be that as it may, we have stated on several earlier occasions that a withdrawal of the ban on indoor politics is a prerequisite to getting such serious matters as internal political party reforms and electoral reform issues moving. Against that background, we view the government's latest position on the issue as quite encouraging and we do expect that the move the law adviser has spoken about will actually turn into a chance for the reforms process to be carried meaningfully forward. Equally important is the need for the Election Commission and the parties to engage in discussions on taking the reforms and electoral process ahead. The reluctance of the parties to talk to the EC before indoor politics is restored has made it clear that unless the government moves to liberalise the atmosphere, signs of a growing impasse could begin to show. An easing of restrictions on politics will thus neutralise such an unwelcome possibility since it will then make it easier for the political parties to involve themselves in the shaping of an overall national political program for the future. A key aspect of the lifting of the ban on indoor politics will likely be a facilitating of council meetings by the parties to help them carry their reforms process through.

Of significance is the assertion by another adviser to the government that if anyone among the reformists within the parties is suspected of any wrongdoing, he or she will be held to account. Such a position on the part of the government ties up with public expectation, for it dispels the notion that individuals suddenly given to supporting reforms in their parties, assuming there are charges of wrongdoing against them, might themselves be trying to elude justice. The law must be applied equally to all, if politics is to regain the respect it once had in this country.

Spilling the beans

Probe into Rajuk should lead to its overhaul

THE extent of anomalies, irregularities and corruption in Rajuk, the government agency for developing housing facilities in the city, as revealed by the taskforce appointed to look into its affairs, is alarming, to say the least.

The agency in charge of authorising building projects and distributing prime land in the form of residential plots to citizens virtually became a private preserve of the corrupt officials and employees, especially CBA leaders. It's difficult to point out a single area where Rajuk has performed satisfactorily! To begin with, it has been allowing a number of real estate developers, having no approval from Rajuk itself, to carry on housing business with it. Obviously, such illegal deals were the result of the developers heavily bribing Rajuk officials and employees. It seems rules and regulations had no place in its *modus operandi* and there was nobody to oversee its functioning. Or, those who were meant to oversee were themselves beneficiaries of dubious deals.

Rajuk officials and employees, from the very bottom to the top, allegedly managed to grab at least one piece of land in the city. This is another example of how they bypassed or manipulated the rules to take possession of residential plots meant for citizens.

There was the strident presence of CBA leaders who virtually controlled the recruitment process in Rajuk, which needed a lot of technically competent hands to operate professionally. But the CBA leaders made sure that only their candidates got the jobs.

Finally, they misappropriated several crores of taka deposited by plot recipients, through fraudulent means. They even didn't bother to return the unsuccessful plot seekers' money in many cases. The list of crimes committed by them is endless.

And all this happened in a government agency run with taxpayers' money!

The government has its job cut out: bring all the culprits to justice, meet the grievances of people at the receiving end of Rajuk's wrongdoing and thoroughly overhaul the administrative structure of Rajuk to avert its relapse into another cycle of corruption and expropriation of public property.

Indo-Bangladesh talks in Dhaka

BOTTOM LINE

Both need each other in the globalised world. Good relations are built on principles of mutual trust, good neighbourliness and consideration. It is hoped that the talks just concluded will be the beginning of a new chapter of an abiding, cooperative and trustful bilateral relationship.

water experts at the upcoming meeting of the Joint Committee of Experts. This is important for Bangladesh, because if India "sneezes" Bangladesh catches "cold" later.

The chief adviser rightly pointed out to India's foreign secretary that economic development and prosperity of the region were in the interest of the two countries, and that the next-door neighbours should work together for the mutual benefit of the peoples of the two countries.

Bilateral relations between neighbours are always complex. They depend on many factors, including the ideologies of the governments in power. Right-wing governments tend to be engrossed in their own national interests, and flexibility in policy decisions is rare.

Why do Bangladesh-India relations go through a cycle of cooperation and non-cooperation?

The very fact that the two foreign

secretaries met after two years demonstrates that bilateral relations remain uneasy, although they are correct in their dealings; otherwise officials of neighbouring nations should meet regularly and routinely, as they do in Europe or in ASEAN nations.

The state of Indo-Bangladesh relations is to be appreciated in the following context:

First, the asymmetrical physical sizes of India (3,166,829 square kilometers) and Bangladesh (147,570 square kilometers) create a relationship that can be best understood by the analogy of sleeping with an elephant. However well-tempered and decent the beast is, every twitch and grunt of the elephant makes the sleeping neighbour uneasy. This implies that bigger neighbours have to be very sensitive to the concerns of smaller neighbours.

Second, Bangladesh does not have the capacity or ability to impose

a solution to a bilateral issue with India. India has to take the initiative because it is capable of doing so. The 1996 Ganges Water Treaty is an instance.

India has been ignoring solution of outstanding prickly issues, such as sea boundary, ownership of Talpatty Island, understanding on the proposed Tipaimukh dam on Barak river in the east, and exchange of enclaves as agreed under the 1974 Land Boundary Agreement. Trade deficit for Bangladesh, in the billions of dollars, does not help bilateral relations and has become a political issue.

Third, India is a regional power and has different global and regional interests from those of Bangladesh. China's relations with India remain uneasy, although considerably improved in economic areas. Bangladesh does not wish to be embroiled in Indo-China relations, and has to maintain a delicate balance between them, given its geographical location.

Fourth, India's policies should not be perceived as being intimidating to Bangladesh. This will spoil mutual trust for each other. For example, India has quietly embarked on construction of a fence that will eventually reach across 3,300 kilometres, hundreds of rivers and long stretches of forests and fields to seal itself off from Bangladesh, although India continues to assert "friendly and cooperative" ties with Bangladesh. Already 2,500 kilometres have been built quietly over the past seven years.

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Fourth, India's strategic interests often affect small neighbouring countries. Often a small neighbour's close relations with big or regional powers tend to annoy India, as they affect India's overall strategic interests.

For example, Bangladesh could not conclude the Soja agreement with the US in 1998 because of reported objection of the Vajipai government. No large country should

restrict or restrain the flexibility of a neighbour's foreign policy on the ground of it being against its strategic interests.

Factors for bilateral relationship

The recognition that each country has its own view on a given issue is imperative, and not to understand this perspective is to misjudge the very nature of solid bilateral relationship. Close friend does not mean that both countries must always have the same view on a given issue.

India must appreciate the sensitivity of the people of small countries like Bangladesh. It means that a small neighbour tends to guard its independence vigorously, and any perception of dominance by a bigger neighbour, rightly or wrongly, does not help improve bilateral relations.

Economic relations are not independent of political relations. In most cases, good political relations fostered by identical values, common problems, and similar experiences, tend to promote economic relations. Evidence in all regions of the world confirms that economic relationship or interdependence is the closest between neighbouring countries.

India has not been able to assist

Bangladesh in its infrastructure developments as Japan and China have. There is no visible project or infrastructure in the country that

of the prickly issues. This available opportunity must not be missed, according to many political observers. Such opportunities existed during the Mujib-Indira days in the early 70s, but political analysts believe that Indian bureaucrats failed to take advantage of their warm personal relationship to resolve many bilateral issues.

Once the issues are resolved to mutual satisfaction, the Bangladesh people will tend to support any initiative the government takes with India in respect of closer relations, including inter-connectivity of transportation on land and river. Chittagong port may eventually be developed as the regional port for Nepal, Bhutan and northeastern Indian states.

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One fact that India may take into account is that Bangladesh can derail its regional ambitions if it ignores Bangladesh's concerns. There rests, according to political observers, the importance of Bangladesh to India.

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SHAHNOOR WAHID

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

Their next question was concerning the reform process and the politicians who are running around with the reform agenda. They smell rat in this exercise saying that the reform process is going on in isolation and not by taking one another in confidence. This very fact indicates there is no trust and unity among the politicians themselves. They are doing what they do best: Conniving and scheming behind one another but lying with a straight face before camera. Then how can these politicians do any good for the nation?

included public and private university teachers, retired government officers, doctors, students, businessmen and social and environmental activists. From the heart to heart discussion this writer could discern an undercurrent of despondency laced with anger and hatred in their tone. Further probing into their minds revealed some thoughts that are collaged below.

These citizens strongly feel that a group of men and women having no trace of honesty or respect for values and morals in their system join some political parties to loot the country's wealth. In their argument they have explained that almost none of the politicians of the last two decades came from affluent or enlightened background and none owned any large business

concern before joining politics.

Hence they wanted to know, how come today these politicians own houses in posh residential areas, more than one business venture and more than one luxury car? What was their source of paid up capital? Also, these people do not have any record of doing philanthropic or social welfare work with their own money before joining politics.

The cross section of people believe that the country progresses because common honest people, farmers, masons, plumbers, blacksmiths, businessmen, teachers, physicians, engineers and government officials worked hard through the decades with whatever resources they had, and not because some politicians gave worthless speeches in parlia-

ment or in public meetings. There they only spat venom against the opposition members, so how can they claim to have contributed in the development of the country?

Rather, politicians in power and their close relations take part in looting of wealth earned by the hard working common people. They import luxury cars and household items and go on for foreign tours or to foreign hospitals to treat common cold spending the foreign currency earned by our exporters and our labour force in overseas countries. Therefore, everywhere it is the ugly tale of grabbing.

It is at such points in the discussion with the citizens that some of them wanted to compare the merits and demerits of fifteen years of "democratic" governance with the autocratic governance of

the previous fifteen years.

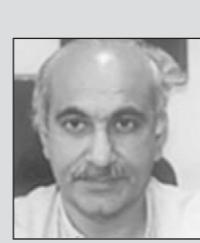
It was quite difficult to counter the logic of some of them who believed the "so-called democratic" rulers were no better than the military or autocratic rulers. Rather, many came up with tangible proofs to stress that the past autocratic rulers and their times were better as far as market price, law and order, infrastructure development, administrative honesty, judicial honesty, control of corruption and politicisation of each and every department was concerned.

And then the citizens came up with some more difficult questions for this writer to answer. They asked: Should not the political parties that have engaged in wholesale looting of people's wealth be banned forever and their funds confiscated? Why only a handful of people, and why not the entire party be taken for trial since they worked in league as a group to plunder?

If common criminals must pay for their crimes, why should politicians get the opportunity for reform? Why murder charges should not be brought against the entire political party(s) when people/supporters die in street brawls during demonstrations incited by the party leaders?

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The long goodbye



M J AKBAR

BYLINE

Blair now accepts that Iraq is a "disaster". In his farewell remarks, he expressed his sympathy for the British troops who had sacrificed so much in his cause. He wished both his friends and his foes well as he said goodbye, but could not hide his long-suppressed hatred for the "feral" media (in a category beyond either friendship or enmity) which had been instrumental in aborting his term to a mere ten years. But at no point during his long goodbye did Blair apologise for Iraq.

by the degeneration in the system of "indulgences" by which a sinner could, literally, pay his way out of sin. Money to the Church purchased forgiveness. The key to heaven lay in the treasury of the Vatican.

Protestants seek a solution. Catholics can get an absolution. True, matters are not quite so simple, for the Roman Church has long ended such deviations. Blair can't sell the mortgage of his homes in London, and send a cheque to the Vatican appropriate to the dimensions of his lies on Iraq. But he is not turning into a Catholic to find out how many angels can dance on the head of a needle.

Somewhere in his conscience there must be a thirst for redemption. The guilt of young lives sentenced to war must be heavy. It is entirely in character therefore that he is trying to relaunch himself as a missionary, with Palestine as his mission.

There is some confusion about the precise profile of the mission. His few remaining friends are suggesting that Blair has been appointed some sort of High Plenipotentiary who will bring peace to the Middle East

with the same skills that he displayed to bring amity in Ireland.

But Blair's Boss, George Bush, has just put in a corrective. State Department officials clarified on Wednesday June 27 that his only responsibility is "shoring up" Palestinian institutions, and not trying to negotiate a peace deal, or "final status", between Israel and the Palestinians. This latter job is for the "big boys" and for a "big girl."

The State Department said that Condoleezza Rice would handle the serious bit herself, because, as she and Israel Prime Minister Ehud Olmert have said, the United States is the only country Israel trusts as broker. Blair is a "true friend of Israel" agrees Olmert, but Britain is not the United States.

Blair's mandate is really not much more than to ensure there is enough money for the Ramallah municipality to clear the garbage, and wheedle out all the Palestinian cash that Israel has withheld on one excuse or the other.

Blair's parish is not even the whole of Palestine. He deals only with the part under the control of Mahmoud Abbas.

What can Blair do as part-time envoy over the next one year that he could not do during ten years as full-time Prime

Hamas and Gaza are out of his bounds. As presently defined, Blair has even less responsibility than once entrusted to the former World Bank President, Jim Wolfensohn, by the Quartet (America, European Union, Russia and the United Nations). Wolfensohn was told to get on with the economics of Palestine but to keep out of politics.

Blair, to state it simply, is no longer one of the "big boys." He may or may not get a salary in his new mission, although he will certainly get a plane. I do hope, however, they don't send the bill for the costs of the plane to Mahmoud Abbas. Nothing is impossible in the worldview of accountants.

Wolfensohn, whose sincerity and stature were beyond question, failed because the economics of Palestine, is inextricably linked to its internal and external politics. Assuming Blair can manage more elbowroom than a World Bank official, he can do better at a moment of severe crisis?

What can Blair do as part-time envoy over the next one year that he could not do during ten years as full-time Prime

Minister?

What can anyone do during an American election year, when balance is held hostage to election sensitivities? This process used to last less than a year. It has now extended to almost two years. New ideas do not get an airing during the missile wars of election debates. The risk of a missile becoming a boomerang is too high.

Blair's mandate is limited to the patch controlled by Mahmoud Abbas. But the difficult part of the story is Hamas and the support it commands, not Abbas. Or is it the new strategy that Blair can mollycoddle Abbas while Israel goes to war with Hamas? It would be an easier war for Israel than Lebanon last year. Unlike hilly Lebanon, Gaza is flat, and Hamas is not Hezbollah.

Can Blair, perceived by most

Muslims as part of the problem, reinvent himself as part of the solution? Blair represents a past that must be swept out of the way if a new route map is to be found. His successor, the new Prime Minister of Britain Gordon Brown, understands this.

He has appointed David

Miliband, a critic of the Iraq war and of Blair's foreign policy, as his foreign secretary. Jack Straw led the campaign to make Brown Prime Minister but did not get his old job back because Straw was too closely identified with the war.

Being Blair means never

having to say sorry. Except, possibly, in the solitude of a confession in a Roman Catholic Church some time soon.

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