

Election roadmap

Go all out for implementation

THE much-awaited roadmap for holding a credible general election by December 2008 has been presented before the nation by the Election Commission (EC). It brings to tangible form the assurance given earlier by the EC of an indicative timeline for the election following the pilot project for preparing voter list with photograph completed at Sipur. Though the roadmap may look a bit ambitious on certain points, nevertheless we feel the EC deserves a pat on the back for setting the ball rolling.

We understand the plan aims to initiate a dialogue with the political parties from September this year on the electoral reforms that have been topics of extensive deliberation for the past months. But we feel the government first needs to lift the ban on indoor politics for political parties to do their homework well in advance to make the dialogue a meaningful exercise. To our judgement, political parties would need several weeks to prepare their list of priorities.

The roadmap envisages completion of the voter list by mid October 2008 and holding of elections in December 2008. We think it is cutting it too fine. There should be a sufficient time-lag between preparation of the voter list and holding of election.

The roadmap sets about completing some legal and institutional reforms by February 2008, including reforms of the Representation of People's Order, 1972; the Electoral Roll Ordinance, 1982; the Election Commission (registration of Political Parties) Rules, 2001; the Conduct of Election Rules, 1972 and the Parliament Election Code of Conduct for the Political Parties and the Contesting Candidates Rules, 1996. The EC plans to complete registration of the political parties by June 2008, which we believe is doable provided the EC has competent staff on its payroll.

We once again congratulate the EC for coming up with a concrete plan to progressively move towards holding the general elections, including upazila elections, and it is appreciable that some deadlines have been given in the plan. What is required now is full government commitment to go all out for implementation of the plans after exchanging views with the political parties. The cooperation of the people in the implementation of the roadmap is another imperative that cannot be overlooked.

Tighter monetary policy, utility price hikes

Avoidable shocks to the economy

TWO statements, one made by Governor, Bangladesh Bank Dr Salehuddin Ahmed and the other by Energy Adviser Tapan Chowdhury late last week, created a stir of sorts. CPD took issue on the tighter monetary policy unveiled by BB Governor to mop up extra liquidity of the banks which, we think, would curb their loan disbursing capacity to the private sector. The think-tank said the move would be counter-productive on inflation, raise the rate of interest and could affect investment and productivity. Reacting to the CPD criticism, the finance adviser referred to the BPC's indebtedness and alluded to a deficit that had to be met. The BB governor has asserted that the policy aims at promoting growth and employment.

The government's aim is to keep the inflation rate between 6.5 and 7 percent. The inflationary pressure has been on the rise not so much because of the higher demands as owing to supply side weaknesses together with increase in government expenditure. The government has, of course, tried to improve the supply side by recourse to duty exemptions and intervention in marketing through its agencies. The fact that these steps have not paid the desired dividends goes to highlight the vestigial tyranny of syndicated manipulations and essential commodities changing too many hands of middlemen before reaching the buyer. Certain administration of shocks to the market, even if unwittingly, had made the suppliers shy, too.

In defense of the contractionary policy, the central bank governor stressed the need for the private sector to increase its efficiency and competitiveness in a globalised context. But apart from bank credit, we need to ensure uninterrupted power supply and efficiency at the port level to enhance competitiveness of the enterprises.

In our volatile price situation, one is at a loss to understand the rationale for the government's plan go for simultaneous increases in oil price and power and gas tariffs which are bound to raise the cost of production, trigger a series of essential price hikes and multiply the hardship of the common consumers. If the ostensible purpose behind adopting a contractionary monetary policy is to keep the rate of inflation in check then it is obviously cancelled out by the increase planned in the price or tariff of oil, gas and power. The answer lies in keeping down government expenditure and borrowing. We suggest the council of advisers rethink the position on the question of raising the utility prices and make sure the monetary policy is friendly to the growth of private sector.

In search of transformational leadership

What this nation needs is deep social transformation that is more likely to be effected in the younger generation as yet unexposed to the ways of the greedy and corrupt. The need is also to build institutions under a transformational leadership that will serve as the foundation to root out the corrupt and the inept. This process must begin at the top and with a degree of urgency, sincerity, and commitment that this nation has not seen in the past. The leadership must come from the ranks of the new, the educated, the young, the idealistic, and the imaginative.

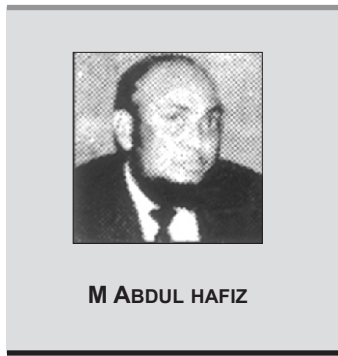
SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

RECENTLY, I was reading Pervez Musharraf's book on Pakistan, In the Line of Fire, when a paragraph jumped out at me. He wrote: "Financial corruption aside, the government was rife with nepotism and incompetence. There was no strategic direction coming from the top. Nowhere, in any ministry, institution, organisation or department, did I see any clear vision or strategy. Pakistan was like a rudderless ship floundering in the high seas, with no destination, led by inept captains whose

only talent lay in plunder." Three items that struck an immediate chord were "inept captains," "no clear vision or strategy" and "plunder."

Whether the Pakistani president himself fits a different bill is a moot question that may be debated elsewhere, but perhaps many would agree that the situation of Bangladesh has been roughly similar, give or take some degrees of difference under the different regimes.

What Bangladesh has lacked is a type of leadership that can truly transform this nation, rich in resources and potential that have



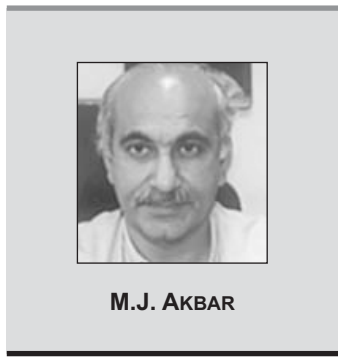
M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE talent and expertise of Tony Blair, a consummate politician who led his New Labour to three consecutive victories to become Britain's most accomplished performer-prime minister of his time, couldn't have gone unnoticed. A spanking new role awaited him, even as the changing of guards in London was hardly over.

Few were surprised, as he was ordained by his Texan friend to be the quartet's special envoy to the Middle East. Blair's unquestionable ability apart, the high profile appointment is ostensibly a reward for his tenacious loyalty to President Bush in the face of massive disapproval at home and abroad of the war they together waged to destroy "Radical Islam" and configure anew the greater Middle East.

Apparently, with Blair, his close confidante, on the spot, George W. Bush wants to step into the crucial endgame of their still unaccomplished mission. On his part, Blair couldn't be happier, because it's the job he looked for.

Any questions?

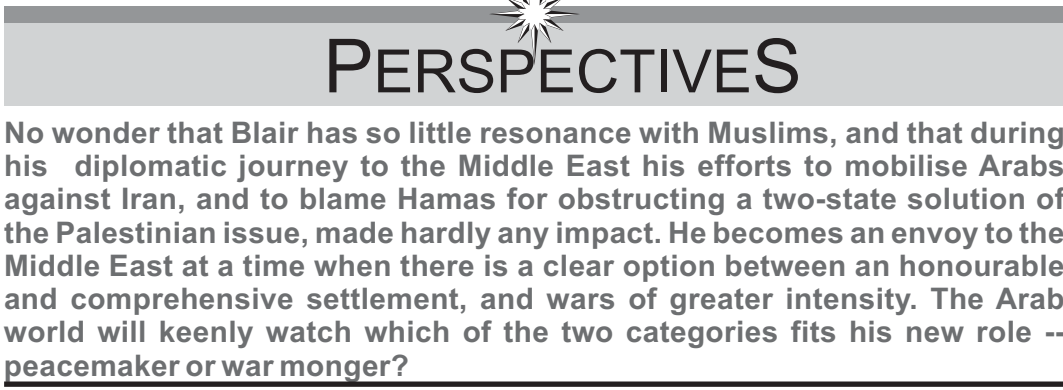


M.J. AKBAR

IS the world under siege by Muslims or are Muslims under siege by the world? Now that the last hope of liberals, Indian Muslims, seem to have joined this world in Glasgow, or perhaps the world has reached their doorstep through Australia, the question has shifted yet further away from an answer. Are we in that dark penumbra of history when the only response to a question is more questions?

Let me unburden myself of the one at the top of my mind. Which of the two is more self-defeating - the bruised breast of a self-flagellating Indian liberal who moans that all certainty has collapsed ever since Kafael Ahmed drove a flaming Cherokee Jeep into Glasgow airport, or the crude fist of the zealot who gloats that you can put the Muslim anywhere but you cannot change his fundamental fanatic character?

On consideration, the first is the bigger problem, if only because nothing better could be expected from the second. Both positions are based on the same



No wonder that Blair has so little resonance with Muslims, and that during his diplomatic journey to the Middle East his efforts to mobilise Arabs against Iran, and to blame Hamas for obstructing a two-state solution of the Palestinian issue, made hardly any impact. He becomes an envoy to the Middle East at a time when there is a clear option between an honourable and comprehensive settlement, and wars of greater intensity. The Arab world will keenly watch which of the two categories fits his new role -- peacemaker or war monger?

So far so good.

In a joint announcement last week, the US, UN, EU and Russia confirmed that Blair would be adopting this role with immediate effect, and the entire Arab world heard as kance that this man -- given his despicable role with regard to the Middle East -- would be the peace envoy in the region.

Barring the guarded welcome by an almost non-entity like Mahmoud Abbas, the US Israeli backed president of the Palestinian Authority (PA), no Arab leader has so far welcomed Tony Blair's appointment as the Quartet's envoy for the Middle East. The more popular Hamas has rejected Blair's new role outright.

The media, from the Gulf to the Atlantic, doubted that a man so closely identified with the US neo-conservative agenda could play the role of an honest broker. The most enthusiastic reaction has, however, come from Israel, while the US has welcomed what is obviously its own decision.

In the meantime mixed mes-

sages emanate from the Western press. A report in The New York Times suggested that President Bush wanted Blair to work on behalf of the quartet to help the PA president build the institutions and apparatus of a viable state. But neither the quartet's brief nor the White House's statement speak of an Israeli withdrawal or of a sovereign Palestinian state.

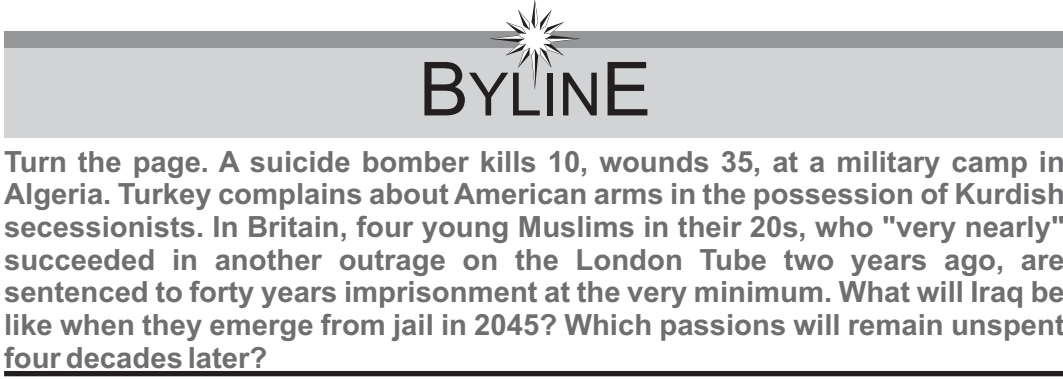
In fact, the quartet is long dead because its idea and existence was associated with the "Road Map" unveiled by President Bush in 2003, but the president himself sabotaged it by saying that the 2005 deadline for the emergence of a Palestinian state was unrealistic.

The prestigious German weekly, Der Spiegel, disclosed that the German Foreign Office had not been informed of the plans to nominate Tony Blair for the post, even though German Foreign Minister, Steinmiller, currently represents EU in the quartet. Russia is reported to have only grudgingly accepted the

appointment.

On the issue of Blair's new role, the harshest comment has come from Britain itself. Writing in the Independent, Robert Fisk felt overwhelmed at the news that "this vain, deceitful man, the proven liar, and a trumped-up lawyer, who had the blood of thousands of Arab men, women and children on his hands, is really contemplating being our Middle East envoy." Saying that Blair was totally discredited in the region, Fisk finds him as a politician who signally failed in everything he had ever tried to do in the Middle East.

Reflecting on the Arab perspective, Soumaya Ghanoush wrote in the Guardian that in the Middle East Blair's name was associated with catastrophe, and the inferno he helped create in Iraq. "For that is," Ghanoush reminded the readers, "exactly what Iraq is today whatever Blair may think, shrouded in a cocoon of hubris as he is. But he has no idea of how deeply loathed he is in the region



Turn the page. A suicide bomber kills 10, wounds 35, at a military camp in Algeria. Turkey complains about American arms in the possession of Kurdish secessionists. In Britain, four young Muslims in their 20s, who "very nearly" succeeded in another outrage on the London Tube two years ago, are sentenced to forty years imprisonment at the very minimum. What will Iraq be like when they emerge from jail in 2045? Which passions will remain unspent four decades later?

fallacy. They lay the sins of a few upon the head of the community.

Must all Indian Muslims be punished with collective guilt because a Kafael or a Shakeel, provoked by memories and images that could easily range from Babri to Basra, has chosen to vent his rage through unacceptable violence upon innocents? Do we blame Hinduism or Hindus for the malevolence of those who killed and terrorised Muslims in Gujarat five years ago? We do not, and must not. Is there any reason why Muslims converge so easily into a category?

A related question: how Indian is the Indian who has left India? Think about the nuances before jumping into that dangerous pit called a conclusion. Those of us who live in India, and have worked through the snide insults of the sixties, the jeers of the seventies, the doubts of the eighties, and the despair of the nineties, to arrive at the rising confidence of this decade have a right to some marginal satisfaction at our nation's achievement.

We have no right to be smug, though, as long as half a billion Indians go to sleep hungry, perhaps even famished. Our social fabric has strengthened, but is still vulnerable to wear and tear. The immediate future is going to be as difficult as the past, as the guns of *Naxalites* constantly remind us. But there is a question: is India of the 21st century only as strong as its weakest link? If that is true, then there is something untenable about the structure of the success.

Cause and effect are such troublesome concepts. Which comes first? That is only the beginning of another round of questions. Cause and effect mutate, then interlink and spawn bastard progeny. In Iraq, George Bush has trapped America in the coils of linkages that have now escaped the limitations of logic.

Five years ago, there was only one terrorist in Iraq: Saddam Hussein. He terrorised his people, perhaps the worst form of terrorism. There was one reason for anger five years ago. Who can count how many reasons

jostle for attention in a young person's mind after four years of war, mayhem and occupation?

Four million Iraqis have been displaced; the demographic equivalent in India would be more than 200 million uprooted. That is the scale of the human disaster. No one has an accurate count of the Iraqi dead. Bush spends a quarter of a million dollars a minute just on the war in Iraq.

Read that again, it isn't a mistake: a quarter of a million dollars every minute. That bill doesn't include the costs in Afghanistan. Even the British appetite for Bush has ebbed, with a cabinet minister saying that British policy will not be joined at the hip to Washington's. British casualties are now approaching the rate suffered in the Second World War. And only 22% of Iraqis support the presence of Anglo-American troops.

Whatever the cause, such are the effects. As Paul Wood, defense correspondent for British television's Today program, said on Friday: "Who

wants to be the last man to die for a lost cause?"

A newspaper is life distilled into still life. If the siege we mentioned is global, then perhaps a good checkpoint is a global newspaper through which we might ponder the mysteries of cause and effect.

At the top of the front page of the July 12 edition is a moving photograph of a woman, her head bowed beyond sight, her tears hidden in the cusp of an anguished hand, sobbing on the coffin of a lost son or husband, one of the over 8,000 Muslims massacred by Serbs in Srebrenica twelve years ago, during the ethnic cleansing that began on July 11, 1995. They have just identified a fresh lot of 465 victims.

Where is one of the principal leaders of this genocide, a mass murderer called General Ratko Mladic. If you want to chat with him, he is down at the nearest cafe. If you are the European Union or America, then he becomes invisible. He cannot be found.

Below this picture is the story of Lal Masjid, a citadel of paranoia, xenophobia and terrorism masquerading as a mosque and madrasa. There are no Christians or Serbs in this battle in Pakistan, which has taken at least a hundred lives. This is a war between different attitudes to faith. And this is proof that terrorism is a fire that can also burn the hands of those who feed it.

To the left of this picture is a

set that made Ms Albright maintain that the deaths of a million Iraqi children due to US-sponsored UN sanctions was worth the cost, and make Ms Rice maintain that, notwithstanding half a million Iraqi deaths and displacements since the 2003 invasion, Iraq today is better off than it was under Saddam Hussain.

According to another version, the dynamic that drives Blair beyond imperialist illusions may be a religious/ideological factor Blair shares with Bush. As Blair became increasingly concerned about his legacy as a consequence of the wars he co-initiated with Bush, he became an exponent and defender of global values threatened by political Islam.

No wonder that Blair has so little resonance with Muslims, and that during his diplomatic journey to the Middle East his efforts to mobilise Arabs against Iran, and to blame Hamas for obstructing a two-state solution of the Palestinian issue, made hardly any impact.

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Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BIISS.

story about Wolfgang Schauble, Germany's top security official, a heavyweight in Angela Merkel's cabinet. He is demanding the detention of potential terrorists in Germany and the extermination (death, in simpler language) of their leaders outside Germany.

Schauble, but naturally, will determine the definitions of "potential" and "leaders." He will not send anyone to exterminate General Ratko Mladic. He is on the lookout for Lebanese Muslims.

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Is the world under siege? Are Muslims under siege? If you know the answer, go collect your Nobel Prize for Peace, or at least an invitation to a seminar in Europe. To me, six of one looks suspiciously like half a dozen of the other.

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down the line.

Unfortunately, in a culture that breeds, nurtures, and sustains a feudalistic mind-set, where (so-called) leaders at every level behave like feudal lords with numerous serfs and sycophants to serve their whims and fancies at a moment's notice ... to be repeated down the line ... the type of leadership that this nation has seen is crude, abysmal, reactionary and lacking promise of instilling participative and democratic norms.

Among those who have begun to raise a hue and cry about reforms, early elections, and the installing of democratic ideals, none seem to fit the bill as transformational leaders. The noise they have begun to make seems to be driven by external forces, or by a desire to save their own skins, that will do little to install democracy in the country. Elections do not a democracy make!

What this nation needs is deep social transformation that is more

likely to be effected in the younger generation as yet unexposed to the ways of the greedy and corrupt. The need is also to build institutions under a transformational leadership that will serve as the foundation to root out the corrupt and the inept.

This process must begin at the top and with a degree of urgency, sincerity, and commitment that this nation has not seen in the past. The leadership must come from the ranks of the new, the educated, the young, the idealistic, and the imaginative.

Without such leaders, we will again be stuck with a set of autocrats and feudal lords who often rely on external sources and not their own people for their legitimacy and continuity, and who have shown that serving their own interests is paramount. And that does not bode well for the dream of *Shonar Bangla*.