

Unity, apology and the demon of divisive forces

AHMED SHAFIQUL HUQUE

THE phenomenal power of words became evident this week. Politics in Bangladesh has entered a new phase following Khaleda Zia's statement expressing dissatisfaction with the arrest and subsequent treatment of Sheikh Hasina in the court compound.

It caught the country off-guard, since no one expected the former prime minister to come out with such a strong statement in favour of her arch political rival and bitterest critic. Khaleda Zia's carefully crafted statement did allude to the irrelevant and personal criticisms made by Sheikh Hasina on the immediate past prime minister, but graciously registered strong protest against the perceived "mis-handling" of the arrest procedure.

Khaleda Zia's statement has

elevated her status a few notches, as much as B. Chowdhury's demand for special treatment for heads of state and government lowered his. It is difficult to discern whether B. Chowdhury's statement and show of support was prompted by Sheikh Hasina's intervention, or the publication of a report in a local newspaper that a substantial amount of money had changed hands to ensure the nomination of a candidate who was not even a member of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

The transaction has apparently been confirmed by the leader's son Mahi Chowdhury, a leader of LDP in his own right. Hence, the introduction of two sets of lawsone for the incumbent and former heads of state and government, and another for the rest of the citizenswas suggested at the wrong time, and critics could find a connection

between the statement and the "money for nomination" scam. If the constitution ensures equality of all before the law, how can a former president suggest otherwise?

One positive outcome of the support expressed for Sheikh Hasina by a former prime minister and a former president has caused a ripple effect among their supporters. Hence, teachers at the University of Dhaka are demanding dignified treatment for both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia. And a rally by BNP supporters in New York demanded release of both Tarique Rahman and Sheikh Hasina.

Who would have thought such unity would be possible? Both leaders have accused each other of being ruthless and unfair in persecuting the other. Sheikh Hasina's arrest and Khaleda Zia's statement seem to have unified

political elements of all shades, who have now realized that their survival depends on the unity they have neglected for many years.

The country will wait with interest to know Sheikh Hasina's reaction to these developments. It could be a long wait.

While the unifying impact can be seen as a positive development, Kamal Hossain's demand for "apology by wrongdoers" is not. Kamal Hossain himself apologized publicly for his past mistakes, and is calling upon others to do so. Bangladeshi have gone through this useless ritual before.

The Awami League returned to power in 1996 by apologizing for their mistakes and, after returning to power, it did not take long for the party to indulge in activities that required more apologies. Kamal Hossain's extensive experience in politics must have given him the

realization that such apologies cannot be expected to be sincere, and that it was meaningless to harp on this ritual.

What the country expects is to see wrongdoers brought to justice, and treated according to the laws of the landwhether the perpetrator is an ordinary citizen or a head of state or government. There is no scope for anyone to be accorded special treatment on grounds of being related to a past or present national leader. "Maaf chawa" is no remedy for plundering the country and torturing people. They deserve severe punishment.

The most recent development during a time when political activities are prohibited is the birth of a political party. It is outrageous to allow certain groups to continue political activities while others cannot do so. The government's credibility will suffer from the

application of double standards. Speculation abounds regarding the impetus, support, and financing of the new political party.

Taking into consideration the level of political development in Bangladesh, it is safe to predict that there is no way to replace the two major political parties.

Bangladesh Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. These parties have established roots in the country over years of hard work by dedicated organizers. The Progressive Democratic Party will simply become another bargaining chip, ready to be used in the tussle between the two major parties.

The Jamaat-i-Islami and various factions of the Jatiya Party and others, like the Khelafat Majlis, have caused enough damage to the country. Devoid of

any clear political ideology or clout to win elections, such parties have used the existing system to their advantage by jumping on the bandwagon of the major parties and alliances in return for seats in the Parliament, and even the cabinet.

In turn, the major political parties have used them to ensure majority in the Parliament and attain short-term gains, often sacrificing principles that have contributed to their stature as the leading political parties of Bangladesh.

The attempt to create further divisive forces in the society at the moment, when there is a silver lining of unity among political parties, is a matter for concern. Leaders of both parties have repeatedly asserted that they will introduce reforms to ensure democratic practices, and eliminate the

undesirable elements of terrorism and corruption. The next step is to facilitate the process by providing support and ensuring appropriate penalties to those who have violated laws in the past.

The political community should send a clear message that Bangladesh is now poised to enter an era of decent, mature, unified, rational, and intelligent approach to politics. Neither the creation of new factions nor the expression of apology will have any contribution to that end. Let the healing process begin.

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India elects its first woman President

MAHMOOD HASAN

A presidential election for any country is an important national event, and if the country is large as is India it evokes keen interest among its neighbours. The president of India is head of state, supreme commander of the armed forces and the chief guardian of the Constitution. He also exercises immense power, can dissolve the parliament, call for fresh elections, and can even declare war on another country but all on the advice of the prime minister. It is, ostensibly, an immensely powerful post but is, in reality, a ceremonial sinecure.

Indian lawmakers went to the polls on July 19 to elect their 13th president. Mrs. Pratibha Patil was declared elected on July 21, and will be sworn in on July 25 for a period of 5 years. The incumbent, President Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, shall complete his term on July 24.

Unlike the Lok Sabha elections, which are based on universal adult franchise, the Electoral College indirectly elects the president. The 4896 members of the Electoral College come from all the parliaments; Lok Sabha - 543, Rajya Sabha - 233, and the state assemblies - 4120. As each of these Electoral College votes has weightage, the calculation procedure is complicated, but, generally, a candidate winning the majority of these votes is declared the winner.

Dr. Kalam was not in the fray as the Left Parties were against giving a second term to him. At a function recently he remarked that

he would leave Rashtrapati Bhawan with only two small suitcases. No president in India has done two terms except Rajendra Prasad (1950-1962).

This year there were 84 candidates in the race. Only two candidates survived the scrutiny/vice President Bhairon Singh Sekhawat (who was also Governor of Rajasthan) and Mrs. Pratibha Patil, the incumbent Governor of Rajasthan. Some of the well known names which were doing the rounds in Delhi for some time were Joyti Basu (former chief minister of West Bengal), Pranab Mukherjee (foreign minister), Dr. Karan Singh (son of Raja Hari Singh of Kashmir), Shivraj Patil (former speaker and home minister), Sushil Kumar Shinde, Somnath Chatterjee (incumbent speaker), and several others.

Normally past presidential elections in India have been built on consensus. But this time the election for the first citizen of India had taken a rather unusual twist. Every party and alliance fielded a candidate. But since the Lok Sabha and several state assemblies are under the control of UPA number wise Congress had the ultimate say.

On June 14, the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) announced Mrs. Pratibha Patil, the Governor of Rajasthan, as its candidate for the presidential post. The high-minded Left Parties, unwilling to see Bhairon Singh Sekhawat as head of state, quickly gave their consent to the UPA candidate. After all, do they not "support-UPA-from-outside?"

From the manner in which

Congress went about this nomination it looks like they wanted a loyal president at Raisina Hill, where the Rashtrapati Bhawan stands. The opposition National Democratic Alliance (NDA), led by the BJP, decided to support independent candidate Bhairon Singh Sekhawat. Congress knew well that the veteran Sekhawat would certainly not be a pliant resident.

Farsighted Sonia Gandhi needed a loyal president, not only for the remaining term of the UPA government but also for the Lok Sabha elections of 2009. Given the political fragmentation of Indian polity, it is unlikely that any single party can win a majority at the hustings of 2009. The president shall play a crucial role in the formation of the government at that time.

The 72 year-old lawyer Pratibha Patil, from Jalgaon in Maharashtra, was hardly known or seen in public life. She does not belong to the mainstream political culture of India. Congress leaders, let alone workers, hardly knew her name. She shot into fame because Sonia Gandhi had chosen her. She had never been in the central cabinet, never was chief minister of any state, or even a member of the Congress Working Committee.

Her husband Devi Singh Sekhawat lives in Amravati, son Rajendra Singh in Mumbai, and daughter Jyoti Rathod in Pune. Vegetarian Pratibha Patil kept the expenses of the Jaipuri Raj Bhawan to a minimum. There were no parties, dinners, or musical evenings at the Governor's House. As governor of Rajasthan,

she lived alone and led an austere life. For her, the governorship was probably the highest point in her life.

This time around, a divided NDA failed to collect the numbers for their candidate, Sekhawat. Shiv Sena of Bal Thackeray of Mumbai, a key ally of the BJP, broke ranks and voted for Pratibha Patil. Desperate, the Advani group within the BJP masterminded a vilification campaign against the UPA candidate. Acerbic BJP lawyer Arun Jaitley, assisted by the communal Arun Shourie, launched a website "knowpratibhapatil.com" which contained some very damning accusations against the UPA candidate.

Patil has been accused of financial irregularities, of being involved in protecting murderers, and of ignorance. Irregularities at "Pratibha Mahila Sahakari Bank," and her sugar factory at Jalgaon defaulting on Rs 20 crore, were posted on the web. Her remarks on the use of the veil by the women of Rajasthan, because of opposition during Moghul rule, confirmed her appalling ignorance of history and came under severe criticism.

As the election date (July 19)

drew near, Hindu astrologers predicted that she would win by a large margin, because "the planets were aligned in her favour," which substantiated her belief in superstition.

All major newspapers in India had severely criticized the Congress and the UPA over their choice of the candidate, and rejected Pratibha Patil. AIADMK leader of Tamil Nadu, J. Jayalalitha,

remarked "this is a big joke on the entire country." A non-resident Indian (NRI) commented: "India is ruled by corrupt politicians across the board, with the exception of the president. Pratibha as president would be a plum on the corrupt cake."

There is no dearth of highly educated, well-known, accomplished women leaders in India. In

almost all fields social, cultural, scientific, corporate and public life there are outstanding leaders who are women. Anyone of them would have done India proud.

Though UPA has touted that Pratibha's entering the Rashtrapati Bhawan would help in empowering the downtrodden women of India, there is great skepticism about that happening

under her.

Political culture in the largest democracy of the world has come to such a pass where it has failed to nominate and elect an eminent citizen as president. Congress failed to grow taller than its narrow party interest. Power politics determined everything not morals or ethics.

Interestingly, when BJP was in

power, despite accusations of being communal, it had shown courage and wisdom in nominating Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam as president in 2002, soon after the Gujarat riots. It chose an eminent scientist, the father of India's nuclear program, for the post. Dr. Kalam had commanded wide respect across the spectrum as a non-partisan president this queer hairstyle notwithstanding.

However, BJP's vilification campaign against Pratibha Patil was certainly in bad taste knowing fully well that she would be elected and that they would have to deal with her in the days to come. The smear campaign not only demeaned the office of the president, but also undermined BJP's own position as a responsible political party.

Pratibha Patil is certainly not the worthy successor of the likes of Rajendra Prasad or Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, or the recent incumbents of Rashtrapati Bhawan Dr. Shankar Dayal Sharma or K.R. Narayanan. A highly educated professional like Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh reporting to Pratibha Patil will certainly look awkward.

The only redeeming aspect of this bitter episode is that, on the 60th anniversary of independence, India has got a woman president a break in male chauvinist tradition. A post-independence-born leader as president would probably been more appropriate for an emerging India.

In any case, Bangladesh congratulates the newly elected Pratibha Patil and wishes her "bon courage."

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Turkey elections

ABDUL RUFF COLACHAL



AK party in shabby colors, but Erdogan's government denies the claims, saying its record in office proves the contrary. The government has overseen almost five straight years of economic growth and opened membership negotiations with the European Union. Critics slam the government because the AKP's ideology is not in tune with democracy, secularism, or equality.

Turkey's Prime Minister says the AKP has a conservative democratic ideology. Someone who says "we are conservative democrats" doesn't know anything about politics, in my book. Conservatism and democracy are opposite political beliefs.

The rival camps have been blaring out their songs and messages in Istanbul, Turkey's biggest city. One party alone has more than 400 loud-speaker vans criss-crossing the city, which is now festooned with party banners and flags. Tension marks the polls because of the differences over the presidential nominee.

According to one estimate, three parties will win more than 10% of the vote the AKP, MHP and CHP. Even if AKP has more seats than the rest, there might be a coalition government, which is a risk for the country's stability. Many people feel that it would be better to have a one-party government, which will be careful not to cause any tensions over Islam and secularism. A fragile economy, Turkey needs to be handled with care.

Commentators say that the most important outcome of the elections will be democracy and stability in the country. For the sake of the Turkish people, compromise will be a must after this election.

The ruling AKP will probably get the most votes, followed either by the CHP (Republican People's Party) or MHP (Nationalist Movement Party), and the independents. If the AKP can't form a government, then the second scenario will be a CHP and MHP coalition.

The recent Turkish military operation on the Iraqi border will only help the ruling party to gain more sympathy and votes. Turkey is home to a sizeable Kurdish minority, which by some estimates, constitutes up to a fifth of the population. However, they complain that the government has tried to destroy their Kurdish identity and that they suffer economic disadvantage and human rights violations.

The Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), the best known and most radical of the Kurdish movements, launched a guerrilla campaign in 1984 for an ethnic homeland in the predominantly Kurdish southeast. Thousands died and hundreds of thousands became refugees in the conflict between the PKK and the army in the 1980s and 1990s.

The past few years have seen an upsurge in rebel attacks, which had subsided after the 1999 capture of the group's leader, Abdullah Ocalan. The

PKK is considered a terrorist group in Turkey, the US and the European Union.

Turkey's powerful military which sees itself as the guardian of the secular system has a long history of involvement in politics. In recent years, as Ankara has set its sights firmly on European Union membership, the profile of the military has been lower in public life. However, the military questioned the government's commitment to secularism in the run-up to the presidential elections in 2007, amid a stand-off between the Islamist-rooted administration and the secularists. The army warned that it would defend Turkey's secular system.

Turkey's longing for EU membership has led the leadership to compromises, including reforms, to appease the bosses of EU. Turkey has long been at odds with its close neighbour, Greece, over territorial disputes in the Aegean and the divided island of Cyprus. Now Turkey has recognized Cyprus.

Turkey became a EU candidate country in 1999 and, in line with EU requirements, went on to introduce substantial human rights and economic reforms. The death penalty was abolished, tougher measures were brought in against torture, and the penal code was overhauled. Reforms were introduced in the areas of women's rights, and in Kurdish culture, language, education and broadcasting.

Women's rights activists have said that the reforms do not go far enough, and have accused the government of lacking full commitment to equality, and for acting only under EU pressure.

After intense bargaining, EU membership talks were launched in October 2005. Accession negotiations are expected to take about 10 years.

So far, the going has not been easy. The breakthrough came just weeks after Turkey agreed to recognize Cyprus as an EU member, despite unfavourable comments over its declaration that this was not tantamount to full diplomatic recognition.

As a member of Nato, Turkey is close to Western powers. Ankara's drive toward EU is more for security than for the economy, besides keeping Turkey in the US-led Nato fold. Both USA and UK support Istanbul's claims for EU membership as that would benefit the economic interests of Turkey, EU and other Western countries.

After years of mounting difficulties, which brought the country close to economic collapse, a tough recovery program was agreed with the IMF in 2002. Since then, Turkey has seen impressive progress. Economic growth has been strong and inflation has fallen dramatically.

However, foreign debt remains a major burden.

Turkey's main trading partners are the European Union (52% of exports and 42% of imports as of 2005), the United States, Russia and Japan. Turkey has taken advantage of a customs union with the European Union, signed in 1995, to increase its industrial production destined for exports, while at the same time benefiting from EU-origin foreign investment in the country.

In 2005, exports amounted to \$ 73.5 billion while the imports stood at \$ 116.8 billion, with increases of 16.3% and 19.7%, respectively, compared to 2004. For 2006, the exports amounted to \$ 85.8 billion, representing an increase of 16.8% over 2005. After years of low levels of foreign direct investment (FDI), Turkey succeeded in attracting \$ 8.5 billion in FDI in 2005, and is expected to attract a higher figure in 2006.

A series of large privatizations, the stability fostered by the start of Turkey's EU accession negotiations, strong and stable growth, and structural changes in the banking, retail, and telecommunications sectors have all contributed to a rise in foreign investment.

The ruling dispensation believes that victory for AKP party would further promote the EU's goals, as well as economic and security interests, notwithstanding the fact that the poll is seen as a crucial test of its secular tradition.

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