

In the eye of the storm

Take the people with you Prove the allegations of attempted subversion

WE are deeply concerned over the statement made by Army Chief General Moeen U Ahmed about evil forces trying to make a capital out of Dhaka University incident of August 20 by bankrolling crores of taka to wreak anarchy in the country on the following day. The allegations are of very serious nature. And although, as claimed by the army chief, the design has been 'foiled', the onus is now on the government to come out with credible evidence before the people to enable the formation of a greater public support behind the government's efforts.

Come as the allegations do from no less a person than the chief of army we take these very seriously. But would it not have been better if the 'conspiracy' had been probed first, the players identified and the facts established fully before making it public, in which case the element of surprise would have remained with the investigators. However, since the allegations of an attempted subversion have already been made, these must now be probed thoroughly and culprits exposed as this has to do with paramount national interests -- security and stability of the country.

In the past we have seen how Begum Khaleda Zia's government would see the hands of conspiracy behind all the big bomb blasts in the country and implicate reputed persons with charges that were to eventually prove false and fabricated.

We cannot, however, take the army chief's allegations of evil design behind the deteriorating scenario on the heels of DU incident in the same light as we did about the conspiracy theories touted by the erstwhile BNP-led coalition government. We would therefore urge the government to take a broader view of the whole spectrum of things and then unearth the full facts behind student protest that later turned into widespread vandalism, law enforcers' excesses and the attempts 'to fish in troubled waters' by any vested quarter. We think the lodging of cases against the unnamed thousands is absolutely the wrong way to proceed. It has generated panic among citizens.

Finally we think, the cases against the teachers must be proceeded with utmost care, being transparent and credible at every stage.

Encroachment on forests

Act now to save our biodiversity

GLOBALLY as well as nationally there is consensus on the issue of biodiversity conservation through various means, especially by saving the forests. Because of random felling of trees in the pristine forests of Bangladesh a large variety of flora and fauna have already become extinct and others are on their way to the same finality. It is only a matter of time before the wanton destruction of the biodiversity would result in irreparable ecological disaster throughout the country.

The onus of conservation of a country's forest resources lies primarily on the government; and laws and regulations are created in order to discourage any move to destroy these resources for personal gain. But it can be said with a touch of cynicism that the past governments in Bangladesh did little to save the forests and biodiversity therein from their own party people. In fact, the tale of blatant encroachment on forests and water-bodies by the lawmakers and their henchmen reached a new level in the last five years.

It is, however, heartening to note that a good number of stakeholders, both national and international, including UN agencies, are getting their heads together to find ways and means to address the burgeoning situation. They have spoken loud and clear about the imminent threat the destruction of forests poses to biodiversity as well as the overall environment of the country. The core message that comes out from numerous research works, seminars and workshops is that if the forests are gone, biodiversity will be gone too. The added fallout of vanishing forests is erratic behaviour of the climate, triggering devastating cyclones, earthquakes and floods at odd times of the season.

In Bangladesh, the present forest management system, conservation laws and awareness level of the masses of the people need to be looked into on an urgent basis. Before the world community comes forward to help us with damage control measures, we have to make our own people conscious about what would happen if all the forests were gone one day. At the same time, the government has to recover all the lands, water-bodies and forests from the evil clutches of the encroachers.

Gul, Turkey's new president

The founder of modern Turkey, Ataturk, was an army officer who established the republic in 1923 after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, giving the vote to women, restricting Islamic dress, and replacing the Arabic script with the Roman alphabet. Wearing an Islamic headscarf, as Gul's wife does, is illegal in government offices and schools. But Islam remains a powerful and attractive alternative for many Turks in this predominantly Muslim nation of more than 70 million.

ABDUL RUFF COLACHAL

THE foreign minister of Turkey, Abdullah Gul, is all set to become the 11th president of Turkey by the end of this month. Gul was fielded by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), but failed to win enough votes in the first, as well as the recent second, round of a presidential election on August 24, to become president.

Gul is expected to secure the presidency in the third round of voting in parliament on August 28, when he needs a simple majority to win -- which the ruling AKP Party has.

In order to become president of Turkey, the candidate must have completed higher education, be at least forty years of age, and be a member of the Turkish Grand National Assembly or a

Turkish citizen eligible to be a deputy. The president is elected for a term of office of 7 years, and cannot be elected for a second time.

The president is elected by a two-thirds majority of the total number of members of the Turkish Grand National Assembly by secret ballot. If a two-thirds majority of the total number cannot be obtained in the first two ballots, between which there must be at least a 3-day interval, a third ballot has to be held, and the candidate who receives the absolute majority of the votes of the total number of members is elected president.

If an absolute majority of the votes of the total number of members is not obtained in the third ballot, a fourth ballot will be held between the two candidates who receive the greatest number



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

"Pity the nation that raises not its voice save when it walks in a funeral, boasts not except among its ruins." -- Khalil Gibran

AN apolitical student uprising in Dhaka University on August 20 and 21 has disencumbered the nation of its ignominious impotence -- but at a cost. Indeed, the spontaneity, spread, and intensity of the event has few parallels in our recent history.

It spread like a prairie fire, engulfing in its flames the entire country, while the student community was gripped by a spasmodic hysteria. When the rampage stopped, it left a deep scar on the face of the nation and the establishment. Already exasperated with multiple problems, they are trying to understand what it was all about.

PERSPECTIVES
Was the trivial incident at the university gymnasium alone the catalyst of an episode of epic proportion? Few believe it. Moreover, apparently there is little evidence of the involvement of any political elements during the whole course of the agitation. It remains an enigma more because the fray was joined by many non-students who couldn't possibly have anything common with what the students were fighting for.

However, it goes to the credit of the authorities that they played it cool, and reacted fast and responsibly before it could snowball into yet another national crisis. Now that the storm has blown over, the people at the helm are expected to do a bit of introspection and soul-searching to pinpoint what was it due to.

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A comprehension of the bizarre explosion of the stu-

dents' wrath, the extent of which clearly jolted the authorities and was watched with trepidation by the whole nation, is a must to be able to tide over the crisis that remains only suppressed at the moment. It is also essential to be able to sift out the inherent message of the uprising. These exercises may reveal some bitter truths, which ought to be taken in good spirit.

The nightmarish experience during the past political government of the BNP-Jamaat preceded the installation of the present interim government. The majority of the people struggled for years to bring such a dispensation into being. In a twist of events, the interim government preferred to draw its strength from the military, although there is perhaps nothing wrong in that. But it can happen only at the cost of its standing with the people, who

have welcomed this interim government and appreciated its brave and noble ventures.

Belying public expectations, this dispensation has not been much of an improvement over earlier political governments, either in addressing the hard issues of the nation or in resolving the complex problems of the masses. The socio-economic sector never looked as bleak as it does now. The prices of the daily necessities have perhaps reached an all-time high.

Contrary to an adviser's claim, the purchasing power of the people has decreased due to double digit inflation. The moribund state of the infrastructure, as well as the continuing closure of the public sector enterprises and disincentive in investment, has pushed many to unemployment and virtual pauperisation. Things seem to be withering away, with the economy in the

doldrums. Business and commercial activities have stalled, and there prevails a consternation and a sense of deja vu with regard to past public experiences. ...

All these do not, however, reflect on the government's insincerity, but lay bare the limitations of a non-representative plutocracy staying long in power and expanding its agenda. The interim government, in its desire to do more, has over-stretched. As a result the routine has suffered. Moreover, a small band of plutocrats and technocrats, detached and alienated from the public, can seldom feel their pulse and be aware of their grievances, because there exists no mechanism for this purpose.

Worst hit, however, has been the country's political arena, which suffers from total vacuum. In the process of reforms now underway, the old political edifice has been pulled down without being replaced by an appropriate structure. Consequently, the leadership, organisations, political programs, and even routine activities of stakeholders in national politics are in shreds with the suspension of fundamental rights and the state of emer-

gency. All throughout the country's political history, the nation aspired and fought for democracy and a civilian-political supremacy, which are hallmarks of modern statecraft. It is not surprising that our student community, which has the tradition of pioneering enlightened ideas and bailing out the nation from crises, feels disillusioned at the country's ground realities with regard to its political prospects -- particularly restoration of the democratic status. The students as well as the inquisitive public want to see beyond the realities that meet their eye. However, students cannot indulge in destruction of state and private property in the name of agitation.

The people have made many noble and great sacrifices, and have noble achievements, for which millions laid down their lives. Now when they take stock of them, they instinctively want to preserve those achievements. They have respect for the military, who are in one way or other their kith and kin. Close to their heart is a dream called democracy in its unadulterated form.

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Grave crisis over the nuclear deal



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

THE tussle between the United Progressive Alliance and the Left over the India-US nuclear deal has ballooned into a crisis, which could potentially dislodge the government. Its roots lie in the way the "123 agreement" was negotiated, without any political leaders being consulted.

Opposition to the deal is widespread. But it was only when the Left published its critique of the "123" text on August 7 that matters came to a head.

An ugly confrontation might yet have been avoided, but for two events. First, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh challenged the Left to withdraw support to the UPA in an interview with the Kolkata-based Telegraph.

Second, a US State Department spokesperson reportedly said that "all nuclear cooperation (would be) terminated" if India conducted nuclear tests. This was one day after Dr. Singh said that testing wouldn't cause sudden termination.

The second event created confusion; the first provoked the

Any genuine, principled, opposition to the deal should logically focus on its harmful consequences for nuclear disarmament, and its promotion of an inappropriate, costly, hazardous, and environmentally unsound energy trajectory through nuclear power -- besides loss of India's strategic and foreign policy autonomy via a strategic embrace of the US. These are errors of omission. However, the government's errors of commission are graver. Singh acted like a typical bureaucrat, and left the deal's negotiation to bureaucrats alone. He fomented the illusion that the deal would offer a magic bullet for India's energy problems.

Left. Dr. Singh insulted it, and said: "It is an honourable deal ... if (the Left parties) want to withdraw support, so be it..."

Dr. Singh's self-styled advisers had calculated that this would help him play off CPM West Bengal "moderates" against central "hardliners." This betrayed a serious misunderstanding of how the Left parties make policies. It also underrated the unanimity among them on foreign policy. The Left's reaction was ballistic. Within three days, Dr. Singh was suing for peace.

Such began the worst-ever crisis in UPA-Left relations. The Left now says there'll be "serious consequences" if the government doesn't suspend talks with the International Atomic Energy Agency and Nuclear Suppliers' Group.

Without the Left's support, the UPA will fall short of a parliamentary majority by 30 to 50 seats.

Instead of negotiating a via-media, the UPA deviously resorted to accusing the Left of acting at China's and Pakistan's behest. This tendentious charge was articulated through pro-US

China-Pakistan-baiters masquerading as "experts."

In reality, there's no live contact between the Left and the Chinese communists, about some of whose policies the Left has serious misgivings.

India is now witnessing the most vicious attack on the Left since the 1962 China War. Every semi-literate television anchor, former intelligence spook, and third-edit writer is spouting vitriolic anti-communism. This new McCarthyism betrays malignant intolerance.

Such intolerance is dangerous. If every dissenting opinion is attributed to a "foreign hand," and if every difference on principle is reduced to an "ego clash," there can be no rational policy discourse. That does not bode well for democracy.

It's undeniable that the Left represents India's most important ideology-driven current, which perhaps concentrates more brainpower per capita than any other. Despite the Left's conduct in Singur and Nandigram -- which this writer has strongly criticised -- its stra-

tegic objections to the deal cannot be dismissed.

The nuclear deal is inseparable from the US game plan to recruit India into a junior partnership, not least to counter China, and broadly, to create another anchor for a Washington-dominated Asian security architecture.

The deal cannot be divorced from the June 2005 Defence Framework agreement, from India's two votes against Iran at the IAEA, nor from the 27 recent high-level military exercises with the US.

The Left's critique of the deal is foundational, and centred on the US's destabilising world role and attempt to ignite a second Cold War by encircling Russia and targeting China and Iran through "Son-of-Star Wars" ballistic missile defence. The US remains the globe's most belligerent power. It has made the world more insecure through its Empire project.

True, the Left didn't consistently emphasise the deal's strategic dimensions, and often concentrated on its text rather

than context. It was, until recently, more concerned about highlighting differences between the Hyde Act and Singh's assurances to Parliament. It also didn't publicly agitate the issue.

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However, the government's errors of commission are graver. Singh acted like a typical bureaucrat, and left the deal's negotiation to bureaucrats alone. He fomented the illusion that the deal would offer a magic bullet for India's energy problems.

He capitulated to US pressure on Iran. Former US assistant secretary of state Stephen Rademaker says India's anti-Iran votes were obtained through "coercion."

Dr. Singh still pays lip-service to disarmament, but knows fully well that the deal will enable India to stockpile 1,600 kg of plutonium every year -- enough for more than 300 bombs, in addition to the existing estimated inventory of 100-150 warheads. This will trigger a nuclear arms race with Pakistan, and worse, China, reducing the security of all.

It would be foolish of the UPA to brazen out of its present crisis of survival. It can still rescue the situation by doing four things. The first is to distance itself strategically from Washington -- minimally, by cancelling future military exercises with the US and its allies.

Second, it should initiate what might be called a "domestic Hyde Act" to prevent the transfer of any imported nuclear material/equipment out of India, which would jeopardise the continuous operation of Indian reactors.

Third, the UPA must update the 1988 Rajiv Gandhi plan for global nuclear disarmament and place it before the United Nations. That would concretely fulfil the National Common Minimum Programme's pledge that India would seize "leadership" in fighting for a nuclear weapons-free world.

Finally, the UPA must launch a national debate on nuclear power, reviewing India's (unhappy) experience with it, analysing its international performance, and focusing on its hazards, costs and (un)sustainability.

Meanwhile, the UPA must suspend all negotiations on the deal. Similarly, the Left must categorically state that it won't vote against the government and in no other way help the BJP that could promote a honourable solution.

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tary polls in July with 47 percent of the popular vote and a clear majority of seats in the Grand National Assembly. This was a significant improvement over the 34 percent share of the vote it won in 2002 -- an election that first brought the conservative party with Islamist roots to power.

The elections last month were called earlier than scheduled because of an inconclusive presidential vote in April, when the AK Party's nominee for president, Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, faced severe opposition from Turkey's secular establishment led by the military.

Gul's election was blocked by technical maneuvers backed by the outgoing president and top army generals, notwithstanding the AK Party's majority in parliament. This time around, the party has again nominated Gul for president and, given the recent resounding popular mandate for AK Party, the army might not be able to block his election short of an improbable military coup.

Turkey is a democratic, secular, unitary, constitutional,

republic whose political system was established in 1923 under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, following the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of World War I. Since then, Turkey has become increasingly integrated with the West while continuing to foster relations with the Eastern world.

Turkey, the first secular republic with a majority Muslim population, is expected to soon have a president who prays in public and whose wife wears a headscarf as a manifestation of her religious convictions. This development could also be an opportunity to define secularism in the Muslim world as a political system ensuring coexistence of religion and secularism, rather than as an anti-religious ideology.

The bitter debate over the role of Islam in politics has exposed deep divisions in Turkey. Pro-secular groups say the ruling party, which came to power in 2002 with 34 percent of the votes, did not have a strong popular mandate even though an electoral quirk gave it 66 percent of the seats in parliament, a usual practice in "democracies." The

showdown has also led to fears that the military could intervene and push the elected government out of power.

Now the Turkish premier has warned against military intervention in politics. In 1997, the military pushed the pro-Islamic prime minister, Necmettin Erbakan, out of power, sending tanks into the streets in a message that any concessions on secularism would not be permitted. It staged three other coups between 1960 and 1980.

Gul is a highly respected diplomat who helped secure European Union accession talks for Turkey. Gul's first bid in April was blocked by the secular elite, which includes army generals, opposition leaders and judges, because of his past in political Islam. Elections were necessitated in Turkey because of the turmoil following the opposition by the so-called secular people to stall Gul's accession to presidency. His opponents are also objecting to the fact that his wife wears a scarf over her head.

An ally of USA and a Nato member, Turkey is also a candidate for EU membership. Turkey

has undergone key reforms in order to enter the EU. Under a Gul presidency, Turkey will hopefully continue to combine tolerance with tradition. This would open the way for secularism in the Islamic world that concerns itself with protecting individual freedom and pluralism instead of being preoccupied with debates over issues such as headscarves.

Turkey's election of a conservative Muslim president need not be seen as a deviation from its secular ideals. It is a much-needed embrace of a path different from that of radical Islam as well as radical secularism. The current office-holder, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, is the 10th president since May 16, 2000, whose term expired on May 16, but he will act as president until a successor has been chosen.

The founder of modern Turkey, Ataturk, was an army officer who established the republic in 1923 after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, giving the vote to women, restricting Islamic dress, and replacing the Arabic script with the Roman alphabet. Wearing an Islamic headscarf, as Gul's wife does, is illegal in government

offices and schools. But Islam remains a powerful and attractive alternative for many Turks in this predominantly Muslim nation of more than 70 million.

For too long, the Muslim world has been polarized between secularists who want all public manifestations of Islamic religion banished from their countries and Islamists who insist on reverting to the Islamic way of life. This polarization cannot come to an end without secularists approving the practice of religion.

Although the AK Party grew out of a succession of Islamist parties banned by Turkish courts, it describes itself as a moderate conservative party rather than an Islamist one. Although both Erdogan and Gul are practicing Muslims who were once active in the Islamist movement, their first stint in office reflected an effort to distance themselves from Islamist politics. Under Erdogan, Turkey pursued European Union membership, maintained close ties with the United States and Israel, and attained new levels of economic prosperity.

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