

Five years of Dr Iajuddin's presidency

He has an opportunity to redeem himself now

OUR felicitations to Dr Iajuddin Ahmad on his continuation as President of the Republic on the expiry of his first term on September 5. Constitution allows him to stay in office till the election of a new President, which must await the formation of a new parliament. Therefore he will be in charge of the highest office of the state through a very crucial phase of our national life.

However, we are constrained to say that history will judge him harshly for his controversial role since October 28 last year. He stretched the constitutional provisions to the extent of distorting it, some would even say violating it, to assume charge of the chief adviser to caretaker government in addition to being the President of the country. He virtually circumvented four clauses of Article 58(Ga), including one providing for the choice of an eminent citizen as chief adviser to the caretaker government by consensus of all political parties. In an unprecedented step, Dr Iajuddin invoked clause six of the same constitutional article combining in himself the positions of both President and Chief Adviser. In effect, the caretaker system was hugely discredited. He made the highly controversial statement that in the changed situation, the government has taken on the character of a presidential form. In an authoritarian manner he spurned the package of proposals prepared by ten advisers in consultation with major political parties aimed at resolving the deepening political stalemate. His lack of far sight and sagacity was pronounced.

The simmering state of political confrontation turned for the worse when election date was announced in the face of boycott by opposition parties pushing the country on to a precipice of civil war. In the ensuing turmoil, he was left with no choice but to stand down as chief adviser. Over all, his contribution to the creation of circumstances leading up to the promulgation of emergency cannot be lost sight of.

All said and done, it is our belief though that Dr Iajuddin can redeem himself into his second term. As the head of state during an interim government he has enormous powers. We urge him to exercise such powers in the greater national interest to help ensure a smooth transition to democracy through free, fair and credible elections. As President of the Republic he is the symbol of national unity and cohesion and therefore only expected to play a catalytic role in building harmonious relationship between various parties. Nation looks forward to his rising to the occasion and thereby appear in a better light second time around.

Intel initiative

A potential booster for ICT sector

INTEL Chairman Dr. Craig Barrett's brief visit to Bangladesh, the purpose of which was to offer certain facilities for enhancing the scope and standard of ICT education in the country, has proved to be very useful. It has once again brought into focus the areas where such education can play a vital role in raising our standards to the international level. We are now part of Intel's World Ahead Programme that seeks to provide millions of people across the globe the crucially important access to ICT as a way of improving quality of life.

It is definitely an opportunity that must be seized and made best use of to serve our collective interests. There is certainly no doubt that the ICT is a field which provides an avenue for our students to propel themselves into the international arena in an extremely competitive yet highly rewarding atmosphere. Indians have established their supremacy in this area and there is no reason why our youths should lag behind.

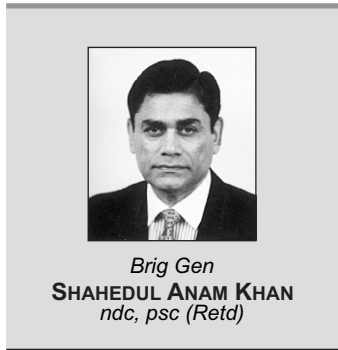
We are told that the Intel programme will be implemented in collaboration with Grameen Solution and it will cover for major areas, to begin with. Obviously, education, economic development, healthcare and e-governance are all important areas where we as a nation would like to achieve a breakthrough. We particularly appreciate the plan to introduce a programme to train teachers who will be in charge of classrooms. Also noteworthy is the Intel Learn programme which will bring the less privileged children within its purview. The reason why the emphasis should be on enhancing the quality of teachers is that we have an acute shortage of good teachers not only in ICT but also in the field of general education.

The Intel programmes cannot produce the desired results unless the vast multitude of rural and under-privileged children get the opportunity to equip themselves with ICT education – a sure way of keeping pace with the fast moving world.

The other good news is that Intel will work with local software companies to develop materials in light of our socio-economic reality. Finally, the Intel plan to set up tele-centres is highly commendable as it will generate employment opportunities that we need so badly.

We hope the Intel initiative will go a long way in boosting IT education in Bangladesh.

Water, water, everywhere, nor any drop to drink!



IT may be a loose analogy, but most of us feel like the ancient mariner, plethora of water around him but which he cannot quench his thirst with. I guess one could say the same of the reform agenda of which so much has been talked about but so very little has been done to date. There is talk of it everywhere but reform continuous to remain elusive, if not illusive.

The country has been seized with the issue since January 12, and the one thing that had generated public support for the current caretaker government was its stated objective of political reforms, since that was a matter that the people of Bangladesh, cutting across party lines, save a few, held a common view on.

The commonly held view is that politics will serve us very little, if at all, if it is continued to be used the way it has been so far. We can ill afford to forget the very compulsions of bringing in reforms, political and of political parties. I do not think that the basic assumptions have changed,

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Whatever reform one contemplates, the crux of the matter is that the need to reform must come from within. The benefits of the changes must be appreciated by all; otherwise there will be resistance to the changes since there are multiple stakeholders with parochial outlook who might feel that their interest will be hampered as a consequence of reforms.

and we can hardly allow the momentum to dissipate.

However, there are many who have constantly held the view that there is very little wrong with politics per se. It is the people who do politics that need to reform if democracy in the true sense were to find roots in Bangladesh. It is the person, so the wise say, and not the system, that is problematic.

Therefore, one could question the rationale of an exercise that would basically change the system, since changing our psyche is not possible, certainly not before the end of December 2008. There being little wrong with politics, what benefit would we get by whatever reforms of the system we chose to implement?

The question is, what is it that we are trying to reform? If you asked a person on the street what he or she would like to see in the system, the answer one was more likely to get was that the system should be so devised that it would keep the bad eggs out of it, and allow only the good ones to participate in politics. It is for the caretaker government, the

state institutions and the civil society, including the political parties, to come together to work out the nitty-gritty.

I believe that more than anybody else, the political parties are the ones that should feel the need to bring in reforms within themselves. The need for this has once again been illustrated by the way the BNP chairperson, in her usual imperious manner, sacked the party general secretary and appointed a new one in his place just before her arrest on charges of corruption.

The demerits of a political party run on the whims of one person, or at best on the dictate of an oligarchy, have been amply illustrated by the way the country was run the last five years. Not just words but deeds are what we want to see in this regard. We are a little bit disappointed that not much progress has been made towards that end.

The redeeming feature in the midst of all the less than fruitful activities regarding reform agenda that witnessed peaks and troughs in intensity, is the recently held work-

would ensure an efficient security system and consequently the state and the nation would get the value for the money spent on it.

It was very appropriate that the workshop considered democracy and good governance also, since these two vital issues will dictate the shape, size and function of the security system. In fact, to make the sector efficient and cost effective it must also be well governed.

The concept of security sector reforms is relatively new, and one must ascertain why we need reform in the first place. There are several compulsions that urge changes. It may be to bring in dynamism in the system or it may be to keep up with the changing times, but there are factors that have driven countries, particularly the developing ones, to effect reforms at the dictates of the donor agencies or the development partners, who make aids conditional upon the extent of the reforms.

Several issues that were highlighted in the workshop are worth sharing. First and foremost is that the term is more encompassing than we had been given to understand. It covers much more than the defense forces or those that are authorized under law to use force for the security of the state, i.e. the law enforcing agencies and the paramilitary forces.

The other two components are the institutions that exercise oversight on this sector like the ministries, the parliament and the civil society, as well as the structures responsible to maintain the rule of law i.e. the

judiciary and the human rights bodies. It is just as well that all these elements were represented at the workshop.

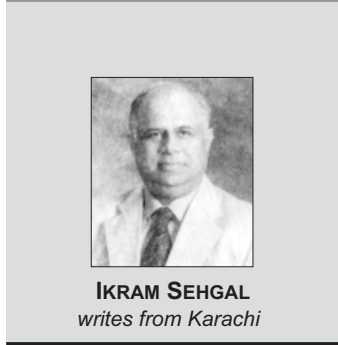
As for the suggestions, there were very fundamental issues that were addressed, including those that have definite influence on how the sector is governed and utilised. Since space precludes a detail discussion at this time I would like to end by bringing out what, to my mind, was the most important suggestion to emerge out of the workshop.

And which is that security forces, including the intelligence agencies, must be freed of the political influence without in any way diluting the political control. (We shall deal with it in greater detail later.) There was consensus that our security sector would have performed better but for the unwarranted political influence exerted on it by the democratic governments.

Whatever reform one contemplates, the crux of the matter is that the need to reform must come from within. The benefits of the changes must be appreciated by all; otherwise there will be resistance to the changes since there are multiple stakeholders with parochial outlook who might feel that their interest will be hampered as a consequence of reforms.

The author is Editor, Defense & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

The eternal triangle



IN her book, published coincidentally about the time Nawaz Sharif was attempting his failed civilian coup in 1999 against the COAS Pakistan Army, Liz Greene says that "relationship triangles are an archetypal dimension of human life. We do not ever escape them, in one form or another. We also tend to handle them rather badly when they enter our lives. We may have to cope with feelings of jealousy, humiliation, and betrayal. Or may have to cope with the sense of being a betrayer – of being dishonest, of injuring someone."

The Eternal Triangle can involve two women and a man or conversely, two men and a woman. Today's politics in Pakistan has such a triangle, involving Musharraf, Benazir Bhutto and Mian Nawaz Sharif. Given the reactions in the last six weeks since the Musharraf-Bhutto meeting in Abu Dhabi and Sharif's reaction to it, is it a wonder, to quote Liz Greene, "that the emotions that are involved in triangular relationships are often agonizing, and cut away at self-esteem? Because triangles confront us with very difficult emotions, we will either

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Liz Greene is well known throughout the world for her instrumental role in shaping modern psychological astrology. She holds a doctorate in psychology and is a qualified Jungian analyst. Mian Nawaz Sharif needs to see her in London as soon as possible, as it is, given the recent Saudi announcement about his commitment to them, he has a severe credibility problem.

Pakistan's murky politics tends to get murkier by the day, even Liz Greene would have given up attempts at objective analysis. Once he became Lt Gen and Corps Commander, Mangla, Musharraf very deliberately gave the ruling PML the impression of being the least powerful among the contenders for COAS, quite different from his actual personality.

Being a Mohajir and, therefore, taken wrongly to be someone without a "constituency" in the army added to his profile as the most suitable COAS in Nawaz Sharif's eyes. In Lahore every other weekend, having a good time, Musharraf seemed least likely to buck the PM's authority.

With Ch Nisar daggers drawn against Lt Gen Ali Kuli Khan, and given Ch Nisar's closeness to the brothers Sharif, the COAS post for Musharraf became a done thing! Within hours of Nawaz Sharif appointing him as COAS in Oct 1998 Musharraf reverted to his real personality, decisively making wide-ranging changes in the Army meant to essentially cook Nawaz Sharif's goose, sooner or later.

Musharraf's good qualities are that he is cerebral and visionary, not normal attributes in any senior military hierarchy, and also quite tolerant unless someone does something personal. Musharraf's outstanding asset, his spouse Sehba, maintains a low profile, very much appreciated in a society fed up of overbearing wives and mistresses.

He never abandons his friends, going out of his way to help them.

This benign benevolence has been grossly misused by both his old friends as well as those new found "friends" who tend to coalesce around every ruler; this is going to hurt Musharraf afterwards whenever an accountability of his era is

done. His finest initiative was accountability of those who had looted the nation, his worst failure lies in compromising that accountability to ensure his own continuity.

Benazir Bhutto grew up as the daughter of one of the geniuses of politics in the world, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Benazir's plus points are that she is well read, extremely articulate and, with two stints as PM, has loads of administrative experience. She has tremendous charisma, both at home and abroad, and uses it well to her great advantage.

Sensitive to the moods of the electorate, she is an astute politician. Ms. Benazir Bhutto is also a pragmatist who well understands that the army has a place in the Pakistani political sun. Her father suffered grievously because of this and she, not so grievously, twice; it has turned her into a realist.

Negotiations with Musharraf is not a one-night stand, it is a well thought-out and calculated political risk, balancing the ground realities of Pakistan with the geo-political complications thereof. Benazir's Achilles' heel is her husband Asif Zardari.

For better or for worse, Zardari's name is synonymous with corruption but, in all fairness, it has been equaled if not exceeded by many in both Mian Nawaz Sharif's and Musharraf's tenures. If Asif Zardari decides to stay put in New York and enjoy his millions, he would do himself, Ms. Benazir, and the country a favour.

Mian Nawaz Sharif is a very likable human being and, like Musharraf, also very loyal and generous to his friends. A product of army patronage (as was Zulfikar Ali Bhutto), but neither from the landed gentry nor with a background of politics (unlike Bhutto), he has done exceedingly well in becoming very popular in the Punjab, but he has very little support in the other provinces.

A scion of a major business family, Nawaz Sharif Suri's economic-oriented vision envisaged rapid development of the socio-economic infrastructure, symbolized by the Islamabad-Lahore Motorway. He could not quite reconcile with his businessmen colleagues paying the due taxes that make up the revenues that run any country.

Late Moinuddin Khan, who left a seven-figure salary to come back and become Chairman CBR, died of a broken heart at this rank duplicity. Nonetheless, most of Musharraf's economic reforms were actually Nawaz Sharif initiatives, Sharif failing to implement them because of political and personal compulsions. The nuclear bomb explosion was a historic tonic for Pakistan (and for the Muslim world). This decision to bring a Muslim country out of the nuclear closet, inspite of the personal risk, goes to his undying credit.

His major problem is that when in power he forgets the promises he makes when he is out of power, his memory being conveniently self-serving as seen in his commitment to the Saudis. If he can come to terms with the fact that his former uniformed mentors have a role to play in Pakistani politics, he could well become PM again.

Some individuals and forces outside "the eternal triangle" that can influence the end result in Pakistan need mentioning. The Honourable CJP Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry is now far more judicially (and by default politically) active than ever. The legalities aside, it will be interesting to see how he reacts to condoning of corruption in both the political and military regimes?

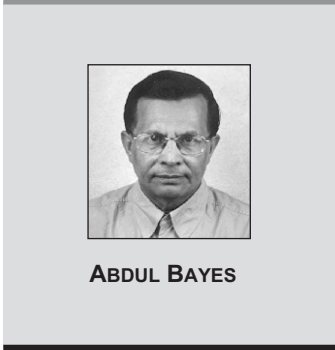
Do not forget wily politician Ch Shujaat Hussain, some people tend to under-estimate the reserves of goodwill he has built up, as well as his inherent knack for effective political manipulation. This man is not about to become a sacrificial lamb!

The US government remains a major factor, vying for continuity of support of their policies vis-à-vis the "war against terrorism" and in Afghanistan. Moreover, 2008 is US election year, and the Bush administration would not like Pakistan to become another hot topic of the presidential debates. Many other factors merit mention in dispatches, but space becomes a constraint.

Notwithstanding the agreement in Abu Dhabi, it all comes down to when one person will doff the uniform. Sooner rather than later?

Ikram Sehgal, is an eminent Pakistani political analyst and columnist.

A footnote for a finance adviser



THE Hon'ble Finance Adviser, Mirza A. B. Azizul Islam, attended a prize giving ceremony recently in the city and made some comments about the role of Bangladeshi economists. Assuming that I could translate them correctly from a Bengali daily, his argument seems to be as follows: "the analyses of our economists are increasingly being dominated by political and personal perceptions. As a result, people are confused about the real economic situation prevailing in the country. It is because economists have deviated from the main goal. The real picture of the economy should be drawn on the basis of economics. Politics should not be drawn into it. To get out of the rot, students should attain accurate economics knowledge and be endowed with sufficient information (Dainik Jonakantha, September

BENEATH THE SURFACE

Finally, economics must have a "human face." Mega malls and mega cities might deprive a large segment of the society and breed inequality, poverty and political instability. Not only politics, cultural values also have a say on economic progress. The knowledge of economics must embrace the factors that had hitherto been in the brackets for a long time. Aristotle, Adam Smith, Karl Marx -- to mention a few -- gave us a lot of insights about economics and politics, from which we can extract the things we need in our specific context.

3.) I am provoked to pick up the pen to provide a footnote to the finance adviser on the nexus between economics and politics. While doing so, I am quite aware of the fact that our finance adviser was top economics student of his time; he worked in international institutions for a long time and also had been serving Bangladesh with due sincerity.

First, my own view is that people read about the economic conditions of the country from the indicators that affect their daily lives – e.g. prices of essentials, cost of transactions, corruption, employment opportunities, law and order situation, freedom at every stage etc.

It is not from the round table conferences, dialogues or seminars of our economists in air-conditioned rooms that people receive the records of the daily economic realities. Again, like our economists and the finance adviser, common people also realise that when their income, or prices in the international market, goes up, prices of commodities that they consume are likely to shoot up.

What they want to know, however, is whether their real purchasing power over time has increased or not. Thus, if income level crawls up by 3 percent and the cost of living index creeps up by 15 percent or so, there remains little room for confusion that the economy is groaning under grievous mis-match.

If the demand curve had shifted to the right to cause price hike -- for reasons known -- the onus lies on the government or the market to shift the supply curve to the right, either through more imports or by augmenting domestic supply. Or else,

foreign investment or economics per se, but against unsustainable growth and development.

Likewise, if mills become unprofitable due to rampant corruption of high officials, trade union leaders, and politicians, the answer should be to remove the headache, not the head. The main culprits should be brought to book. Keeping Chittagong port out of the orbit of trade unions is a welcoming move as it reduces transaction costs and tends to increase exports.

Raising domestic taxes would help reduce foreign dependency, and the present position of NBR in raising tax-GDP ratio should be highly appreciated. By and large, economists need to be more than a fly on the wall; they should not be one-eyed economists.

Third, economists had deviated from their "main goal" long before, in a regime of changing goal posts. In our student life -- and possibly that applies to our finance adviser also -- economic growth was thought to be the panacea for all economic pains.

The main goal was growth and only growth. The Harvard, MIT and Chicago scholars discovered economic models that the then Pakistani rulers imposed on us. Soon it was found that economic growth was a necessary but not sufficient condition for the uplift of the society at large. The idea of two economies

had more of a political tone than an economic one.

Amartya Sen's seminal book, titled Development as Freedom, talked about how economics could be made politically acceptable through a wider participation of people in the growth process itself. It hints at the role of the market as well as the government.

Sen reckons that analyses of development calls for an integrated understanding of the respective roles of different institutions (markets, judiciary, political parties, NGOs, media, community) and their interactions. If economists were to ride only on economic text books and draw the picture, we presume that Joseph Stiglitz would not have to leave the World Bank and write a book called The roaring Nineties -- Why We are Paying Price for the Greediest Decade in History.

There is a single message in this book; "there needs to be a balance between the role of government and the market. A country can suffer from under-regulation just as it can from over-regulation, from too little public investment just as it can from too much ... Countries should feel greater freedom in their choice of economic policies. There is no one way. There is no perfect system ... Other countries may decide to pay more attention to an economic and social system that pays more attention to huge inequality, the large number of people in prison, the anxiety and insecurity that are felt by so many, including the millions without health insurance, and the seeming unconcern about the deterioration of environment."

Economic policies need to be based on political realities. Panic and uncertainties are the worst enemies of an economy, both of which have roots in politics. Corruption constricts economic growth, and reducing corruption requires both economic and political weapons.

On the economic side, rampant restrictions might fuel corruption, and deregulation and competitive bidding could be an option. Economists should not be opposed to that. On the political side, establishment of the rule of law and anti-corruption institutions is a must to deal with corruption, and politicians must realize that.

In agreement with the finance adviser, I would ask my students to rigorously read about the basic principles of economics and increase their knowledge. However, in addition, I would also ask them to know about the conditions under which the government fails and the market succeeds, and vice versa. Bangladesh is a case where both have been failing because of its "derailed" politics.

Without successful politics, economics cannot win. Politics is at the command of economics. India has more per capita scientists and economists than China, but China is running much faster than India in terms of socio-economic development. Brazil has three times more per capita income than Sri Lanka, but the latter ranks high in the human development index.

Malaysian ethnic problems were judiciously handled by politicians and the country marched onwards but, faced with almost same problem, Sri Lanka is terribly trailing behind.

Finally, economics must have a "human face." Mega malls and mega cities might deprive a large segment of the society and breed inequality, poverty and political instability. Not only politics, cultural values also have a say on economic progress.

The knowledge of economics must embrace the factors that had hitherto been in the brackets for a long time. Aristotle, Adam Smith, Karl Marx -- to mention a few -- gave us a lot of insights about economics and politics, from which we can extract the things we need in our specific context.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.