

Ban on indoor politics lifted

A timely and welcome move

We welcome the decision of the caretaker government to lift the ban on indoor politics from Monday, September 10. The timely decision, announced by the chief adviser to the caretaker government Dr. Fakhrudin Ahmed in a televised speech on Sunday evening, will pave the way for the political parties to exchange views with their party leaders and workers before sitting across the table with the EC officials. The EC on the other hand will have no legal bars left to organise such talks with the leaders of the major political parties on the electoral and reform agenda.

There was a common perception that further delay of the much-needed dialogue between the chief election commissioner (CEC) and the political party leaders beyond September 12 would give rise to all sorts of apprehension in the minds of the common people. The onus of creating a conducive environment for holding such dialogues rested on the government. Through lifting of the ban on indoor politics and reiterating its resolve to hold the elections in time the government has spelled out its mind regarding following the election roadmap.

Now that the ban has been relaxed, the dialogue between the EC and political parties should be held with no conditions attached to it. The envisaged dialogue would enable all the parties to open up sufficiently, discuss the problems and obstacles and eventually pinpoint the areas where reforms are needed most.

At this point we may recall that the major pledge of the caretaker government after declaring emergency was to hold a free, fair and credible elections after ensuring certain reforms taking place in the electoral system and the political parties. Now with the ban on indoor politics gone and the EC having no bar in organising the dialogue, we hope the political parties will now come forward with their specific reform proposals and implement them with all sincerity to make holding a credible election possible.

Second phase of flooding

Go all out to meet the challenge

We are into the second round of flooding. This is happening barely within a fortnight of reprieve from the first bout we had endured in July-August period. Predictions are grim. Floods beginning in September are usually longer lasting. If it rains in the next few days as heavily as it did in preceding two days, we then have the beginning of a flood of greater intensity.

The effects of the first flood have been devastating. Now with the onset of the second we are catapulted on to a rescue and relief mission on a very short notice. Already, thousands have been rendered destitute, huge acreage of cropland inundated, communications disrupted and river embankments washed away. Even the rehabilitation activities we have just carried out after the first flood, especially the transplanted Aman and compensatory vegetable cultivation are most likely to go waste. What lies in store can be easily imagined.

It is a huge task we are confronted with. We have to basically make use of the lessons learned from the pitfalls committed in tackling the July floods. During that flooding reaction time taken by the disaster management authorities was too long, priorities were not gotten right from the beginning and there was lack of coordination between the government agencies. A good deal of time was lost in associating political parties, NGO communities and private civic and voluntary groups with the relief operations. There has been a fusion of activities lately on the part of both public and private sectors. This must be built up on by way of mobilising all national resources to meet the flood challenges collectively.

While rescue and evacuation efforts are made on a priority basis to move the thousands of marooned to safer places, sufficient stocks of food, IV saline and ORS, water purification tablets and bottled water must be kept handy. Mobile medical units need to dash out to different places. Let's not forget, timely distribution of succour to the needy is of pivotal importance.

FBCCI and business confidence



ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

No Nonsense

Corrupt politicians, public servants, and business people are partners in crime -- they're mutually parasitical. After 1/11, they lost the blanket protection from their political godfathers. That's why they're now passing sleepless nights. The FBCCI, instead of whining and sympathising with its scared members, must support all reform measures to bring market discipline for the good of business and the country. The FBCCI must also reform itself and clean its own house.

In his response, Chief Adviser Fakhrudin Ahmed stressed that the measures to improve governance and reduce corruption would ultimately help develop the country's private sector to operate with efficiency and competitiveness through reducing hassles, costs and uncertainties.

As Fakhrudin conceded, some discomfort and loss of confidence are inevitable when the parameters of business operations are shifting from a politicised and corrupt environment to a relatively corruption free, politically neutral, and competitive condition. We all realise that businesses are the ultimate engines of employment and economic activity.

Restoring businessmen's confidence is paramount to macroeconomic stability and poverty reduction. However, like politicians, businessmen must realise that the old ways of running businesses are over.

On January 21, 2004, the then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan initiated a comprehensive, inclusive, and transparent consultation process on the possible introduction of a tenth principle against

corruption. To get broad-based support, a formal letter was sent to all participants (1,205, as of December 31, 2003), seeking their views.

By May 7, 2004, 563 responses had been received, of which 536 (95%) supported the tenth principle in the following form:

"Business should work against corruption in all its forms, including extortion and bribery."

- Two of the main arguments supporting this principle are:

- Business should be conducted in an environment of fair competition; corruption is against the spirit of competition and meritocracy.

- Business efficiency relies on confidence between business partners; corruption undermines business confidence.

Curbing corruption and unethical business practices is becoming a high priority within the business community globally. The development of rules of corporate governance across nations is also prompting businesses to spotlight on anti-corruption measures as part of their modus operandi to protect their reputations and the interests of stakeholders.

Engaging in unethical business practices exposes a company to the following undesirable outcomes.

- Regardless of what form a corrupt transaction may take, there are obvious legal risks involved. No wonder that the businessmen in Bangladesh are now passing sleepless nights

- Evidence indicates that businesses whose policies and practices fail to meet high ethical standards, or those that take a relaxed attitude to compliance with laws, are exposed to serious reputational risks.

- There is now clear evidence that in many countries corruption adds upwards of 10 per cent to the cost of running a business, and that corruption adds as much as 25 percent to the cost of public procurement.

- Added costs to businesses accrued due to corruption undermine business performance and divert public resources from legitimate sustainable development.

- There is growing evidence that

bank accounts.

The on-going hunt for the mischief doers must continue undeterred. Of course, some businesses are suffering because their owners are either hiding or hibernating to avoid being persecuted.

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In the US, near a road or bridge repair site, we often see signs which read "Short-term inconvenience brings long-term relief." The FBCCI must propagate this message to all its members. In fact, the executives of this august body should visit its district and sub-divisional level chapters and explain that the regulatory reform being introduced by this government is the last ditch hope for establishing market discipline long polluted by politicisation and unpreceded unethical business practices.

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BJP hurtles from crisis to crisis



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

MANY Indian newspapers and TV channels have become so fanatically partisan on the US-India nuclear deal that they have run a crusade for it and maligned its critics as brain-dead dinosaurs or agents of China/Pakistan.

The saddest example is a national daily, which is the principal out-and-out-spokesperson-cum-adviser of the deal's supporters.

It has turned the deal into a litmus test for India's will to emerge as a superpower by allying itself with the US, for the United Progressive Alliance's ability to shake off the Left's influence, and for the imperative of developing nuclear power for energy security.

Last fortnight, The Indian Express carried an interview-based story in which Bharatiya Janata Party leader LK Advani said that the party wasn't categorically opposed to the deal or to a strategic partnership with the US. If India enacts a "do-

mestic Hyde Act" to protect its "right" to test and stockpile nuclear weapons, he will have "no objection" to the agreement.

Mr. Advani presented himself as the BJP's most important policy-maker, who can single-handedly alter its position, elaborated on August 3. For good measure, he planted another story, falsely claiming that a top RSS leader "appreciated" his stand.

The Express exulted over Mr. Advani's statement, and ran an article by a Hindutva insider, who had "fixed" the interview, now currying favour with him. Both celebrated this "movement" towards a "bipartisan consensus" -- ignoring the multi-polar nature of Indian politics.

However, they hadn't reckoned with Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee's strong aversion to anyone questioning his inner-party supremacy. Mr. Vajpayee had presided over the August 3 meeting that issued the party's statement on the deal, which was drafted principally by former national security adviser and Vajpayee confidant Brajesh Mishra.

After all, the RSS appreciates this zealot's role in pushing Hindutva's ideological agenda in education, which contrasts with Mr. Advani's lacklustre performance as home minister. The "Iron Man" isn't a favourite with the BJP's allies.

Mr. Advani was hauled over the coals and forced to retract his statement. The "Iron Man" executed not one, but two, U-turns --within four days flat. The Express fumed that the BJP's "anti-deal jehadis" had prevailed!

Mr. Advani is desperate to project himself as the prime ministerial candidate of the National Democratic Alliance in a mid-term election. He probably reckons he has played second fiddle to Mr. Vajpayee for too long. But he vastly overestimates his acceptability -- despite his pathetic 9 per cent popularity rating, compared to Mr. Vajpayee's 40 per cent-plus.

By available indications, Mr. Vajpayee isn't about to call it a day, his failing health notwithstanding. Even if he does, Mr. Advani will face competition from Mr. Murli Manohar Joshi.

Now, a "poster war" has broken out, in which Mr. Modi's supporters depict him as Lord Krishna, and his opponents as the hated Kauravas.

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Besides, an election may not be imminent. The UPA-Left joint committee on the deal hasn't completed its deliberations.

Even if these fail, the Left will have the option of protesting against the deal, but not toppling the government.

The power struggle in the BJP permeates all its four core-states: Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, which account for half its Lok Sabha tally. It's particularly virulent in Gujarat, India's most "saffronised" state, where the BJP has ruled for an uninterrupted 12 years.

Chief Minister Narendra Modi faces stiff internal opposition, spearheaded by former chief minister Keshubhai Patel. The inner-party divisions were exposed during the recent presidential elections, when five BJP MLAs defied the party whip.

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Mr. Modi has antagonised the powerful Patidar (Patel) caste. The prosperous Patidars domi-

nate agriculture, small industry, and diamond polishing. Their vote is decisive in 60 of Gujarat's 182 assembly constituencies. They account for almost a third of BJP MLAs.

Mr. Modi will find it hard to shore up the BJP's sinking base. Between the 1999 and 2004 Lok Sabhas, the Congress improved its tally from 6 seats to 12 (of a total of 26), while the BJP's fell from 20 to 14.

In assembly-wise count, the two parties were neck-and-neck. The BJP's earlier 10 percentage-point lead over the Congress declined in 2004 to barely 4 per cent.

In Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh too, the BJP suffers from anti-incumbency. It cannot make up its likely losses there through the small gains it might score in Delhi, Bihar and Himachal.

Only a big state like Uttar Pradesh can permit recouping. But the BJP got all but wiped out in the recent UP Assembly elections.

A recent meeting of BJP MPs from Rajasthan, convened by party President Rajnath Singh, witnessed sharp attacks on Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje by an emerging alliance between Brahmin and Dalit leaders -- a version of "the Mayawati formula."

Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh seethe with dissidence. There's a complete breakdown of law and order in

Chhattisgarh, expressed in the growing Naxalite movement and the state's resort to naked repression, exemplified by the detention of human rights activist Binayak Sen.

The NDA is shrinking as its allies desert it -- including the Shiv Sena, the BJP's only ideological partner. Ms. Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress also seems all set to quit.

The only non-UPA parties that stand to substantially improve their tallies in an early election are the Telugu Desam and AIADMK. But they have joined the United National Progressive Alliance.

A recent opinion poll by NDTV-GfK-Mode forecasts a reduction in the NDA's Lok Sabha seats from 180 to 168. This assumes that the BJP would win 116 seats (in place of 138). But under many plausible scenarios, the BJP could do much worse, going down to under 100 seats.

If uncertain electoral prospects were the BJP's sole problem, it could still live with it. But the party faces multiple crises of ideology, strategy, and mobilisation, as well as organisational disarray.

It can no longer project itself as a credible conservative platform, with a degree of popular support remotely comparable to what it enjoyed until the late 1990s. These crises are structural. The BJP is clueless about them.

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Starting political dialogue

We should not be too optimistic about the success of the political dialogue. No dialogue is fully successful. In this case, success of around 50% should be acceptable. Enough time has already been spent on preparation of voters' identity card. However, the final product appears to be highly acceptable. At the moment, the EC should mainly concentrate on completing the job of preparing voters' list in time.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

The Election Commission has announced that discussions with the political parties will begin from September 12. In accordance with the constitutional provision laid down in article 58D(2), the CTG will assist the Election Commission in holding the discussions on reform.

Invitation letters for discussion will be sent to all political parties by the EC. We are expecting that the dialogue will start just a few days before the

commencement of the month of Ramadan. The dialogue is to continue till November 29. The present political scenario does not appear to be at all congenial for starting the dialogue. The heads of both the major political parties are in sub-jail because of various allegations against them. We have no clear idea as to the time to be taken to dispose of the cases against them, or their fates. Politics will, however, have to take its own course.

Incarceration of the leaders

has exposed the urgency for reform, particularly the need for democratisation, of the parties. Because of the unfortunate incident of Dhaka University the lifting of emergency may be delayed. Credit must be given to the law enforcing agencies and the army for the patience, fortitude and courage shown by them during the crisis.

With regard to participation in the proposed dialogue, the positions of the major parties will be clear after they finally decide as to whether it will be possible to participate in the absence of their arrested leaders.

The new party, Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), headed by Dr. Qureshi, apparently may not make much of an impression, but may try to lead the reform effort.

If the emergency is totally withdrawn to allow full political activity we may apprehend recurrence of some undesirable events like resurgence of vio-

lence on the streets or public places because of possible disturbances in meetings of pro-reform and anti-reform groups, sudden increase in extortion cases, and continuous street demonstrations for release of Sheikh Hasina, Khaleda Zia, Tarique Rahman etc. (to pressurise the CTG).

Thus, lifting of emergency has to be very carefully examined and deliberated upon. It appears that it would be advisable to allow only limited indoor political activity rather than to take risk of recurrence of scenes prior to 1/11.

In fact, completion of voters' list is more important than efforts for reform of political parties by the Election Commission.

The ACC should complete processing of cases of all the important accused as early as

possible to help the EC to block the participation of some powerful undesirables. The government understands well that it has been able to do a lot of good work (not done, or could not have been done, by any previous government) despite so many odds, like politicised bureaucracy, lack of adequate manpower, corruption, and lack of appreciation by major political parties.

At the same time, it is fully aware that it has undertaken a venture reform on the advice of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. In case of reforming the jute sector, people are very unhappy about the programme. Broadly speaking, the performance of the government in the economic field is not satisfactory.

Needless to say that we should be realistic about our limitations in all sectors as a least developed country. We should not be too optimistic about the success of the political dialogue. No dialogue is fully successful.

In this case, success of around 50% should be acceptable. Enough time has already been spent on preparation of voters' identity card. However, the final product appears to be highly acceptable. At the moment, the EC should mainly concentrate on completing the job of preparing voters' list in time.

In handling the political dialogue, the EC may have to be a little tough with the political parties, where necessary. Even if major political parties do not participate on the plea of absence of their chiefs because

of their arrest, the EC may not hesitate to go ahead with the lesser parties. The EC may, however, decide about discussions with the factions later on.

Holding a free, fair, and credible election may be possible with cooperation from leaders like Amir Hossein Amu, Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, Dr. Buddrozoza Chowdhury, Oli Ahmad, some eminent members from the civil society, Dr. Qureshi, and strong support from the armed forces.

At the moment, the people of the country are more interested in leaders' honesty, integrity, and efficiency, and not in their "gift of the gab" or money or muscle. With close cooperation among the ACC, the EC and the army, there is enough reason for fulfilment of the desire of the people.

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