

CA's interview with BBC

His attempt to clarify issues welcome

A first ever question-answer session with any media since he took over as chief adviser to caretaker government Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed elaborated to BBC Bangla Service on his government's position on wide-ranging national issues on Friday. Before we make our comments on his observations, however, we are somewhat constrained to ask why our leaders choose to speak to foreign media in the first place when they have important messages to deliver to the people. Most government leaders around the world would have preferred to give such an important and exhaustive interview to the local media with some international media representatives being present. Somehow our government leaders -- we had expected the CA to break the pattern -- had shown a proclivity towards speaking to the foreign media when the public hungered for listening to important leaders first hand and the local media would go all out to cater to such a pressing need. We saw the practice before and we are seeing it again. This we feel is not a very complimentary attitude to the local media, and it is time to change it.

Now coming to the chief adviser's answers to BBC questions, one finds a candid and sincere effort on his part to clarify various points that have cropped up into the eighth month of the interim government's rule. He didn't parry questions, rather faced them with circumspection and candidness.

He has dismissed the notion of dual government by asserting that army is assisting the civil government and that he didn't see any reflection of political role on the army's activities in curbing corruption, improving law and order and distributing flood relief.

He has admitted to some denial of fundamental rights in an emergency but dubbed it as a temporary measure for 'greater good of the country.' About having a national security council, he has added to its existence in neighbouring countries, which is to say, he has not ruled it out.

However, if the question of duality of power has crossed the public mind it has been due to the way the caretaker government (CTG) has functioned. We saw the CTG's total silence in matters dealing with Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia. On the whole, the CTG was usually found keeping mum on all political party matters.

If in the future the duality of power notion is to be removed then the CTG must lead from the front and be not seen to be reactive to some core issues that agitate the public mind.

In this vein, the performance of some of the advisers remains far from satisfactory in public perception. Some have been overbearing and garrulous some others proved to be confidence eroding by their near total absence from the public view. Most people don't have any idea what many of the advisers are doing.

Let there be no mistaking that we are fully with caretaker government as far as ensuring election by end-2008, if not before, goes. But there are areas even in regard to attaining this goal where progress is not satisfactory.

On the rising prices, blaming international market situation will only be partially credible what we need is getting our act together in striking a balance between demand and supply.

Finally, we welcome the chief adviser's recent trend to speak out in public. This has already had its good impact. We urge him to continue to do so.

Anti-terror cooperation

Neutralise the source of funding

It is good news that Saarc officials are going to meet in New Delhi this month to deliberate on the necessity of getting to the roots of funding of terrorist organisations that operate in the Saarc countries. In a meeting of the Saarc finance secretaries in the Indian capital last week the issue of countering terror-funding came up with due seriousness. We feel it is a burning topic that has to be addressed in a focused manner without losing further time. Since there is an agreement in place on sharing of information among the Saarc countries, having some kind of mechanism installed to find out about how huge sums are being transferred through banks should not be a difficult proposition.

Terrorism in Saarc countries has been spreading its tentacles for decades in a bid to negate the developmental efforts of the democratic governments and the people. The ultimate aim of these groups is to grab state power and implement their own ideology and agenda. Their methods are brutal and bloody, and as a result, the toll in terms of life, property and social disorder has been immense in most of the countries of the region.

It may be mentioned here that the religious fundamentalist groups which are carrying on their missions in some of the countries, including Bangladesh, are known to have motivated a large number of young men through spending huge sums of money. These organisations, supposedly having a steady source of funding, are allegedly operating under the banner of non-governmental organisations, banks, insurance companies and charitable organisations.

Our experience of terrorism is one of senseless brutality, murder and mayhem. Hence, there can be no second thought on the question of uprooting the obscurantist groups from the soil once and for all. We, therefore, look forward to the Saarc officials formulating a concrete mechanism to go after the sources of terror-funding in the region.

The electoral roadmap: Motorway to nowhere



M ABDUL HAFIZ

PERSPECTIVES

In the thick of power, the ruling elite may not be able to sense it, but their appeal has been eroded because some of their steps fly in the face of public sentiments and aspirations. The people are again increasingly resigned to their fate -- a symptom not conducive to the flowering of democratic politics. The phenomenon is visible from the passivity of the people who do not react or protest in spite of their endless sufferings. Do the power-wielders ensconced in the safety of high offices hear the deafening sound of their mute silence and see the invisible writing on the wall?

country's prospects and potentials, provided the old, inept, corrupt leadership yielded space to a new one. The assorted quarters clamoured also for good governance.

With a sense of earnestness, the Election Commission has been reforming and preparing itself for the government's top agenda, a credible election for the ninth parliament. It drew up a roadmap for holding such elections before the end of 2008. After having exchanges as to its fine details with the media and then the representatives of the civil society, its dialogue with political parties has now been going apace since September 12. The preparation of voter ID cards started ceremonially even earlier. These were all positive developments to reach a demo-

cratic destination. Yet, a doubt persists with regard to this optimism.

Many still hold that even if we reach somewhere in our attempts to restore democracy, it may not be the promised green pasture of democracy. Instead, we may, at best, hop into an inextricable morass. Because, in the meantime, the country has undergone a tectonic metamorphosis and its body politic suffered a serious jolt, denting its institutions perhaps beyond repair. As a result, all old calculations, the political equation, and the familiar grammar of politics are rendered irrelevant. In the ensuing milieu, a democratic transition is extremely difficult, if not totally impossible.

The present caretaker government came into being in extraordinary circumstances, by replacing

the old controversial one headed by President Iajuddin himself. Unprecedentedly, it then chose to broaden its agenda beyond overseeing the elections and also extended its tenure. The government undertook far-reaching reforms, and a drive against corruption which the last political regime was besmirched with.

Naturally, the government's actions were received with applause, which gradually cooled down when the authorities were perceived to have, perhaps inadvertently, mixed politics with their widely admired drive against the plunders of the BNP-Jamaat government. The country seemed to be on the verge of national catharsis.

But suddenly the government's hitherto undisclosed political game took over the whole process. It is an irony that

some of the actions believed to be favoured by the establishment seriously damaged or destroyed the existing political leadership, the parties, and public opinion, all of which are quintessential institutions of the democracy. Whereas this exceptional dispensation, with its historical mission, was entrusted with the efflorescence of democracy, it is worth asking whether the very ambience for that to happen is denied with the suspension of basic rights and freedom of expression under a prolonged state of emergency.

As far as the promise of real democracy is concerned -- it has become almost a cliché -- no one has undertaken, thus far, that venture, except a few failed and disgruntled politicians from major political parties. The critics say

that they are in this political fray mainly to curry favour with the establishment, with a variety of motives. Few think that they could be the architects of real democracy in the country. A number of celebrities, including people known for their expertise in this or that, availed the chance, only to quickly give up. The new "hopefuls" in the field also are hopelessly charlatans.

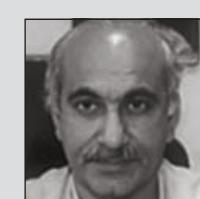
This being the general picture and ground realities of our poli-

tics, where are we really heading -- election or no election? The government may still go ahead with an election of sorts, but in the absence of recognisable political leadership and in a vacuum resulting from the lack of political activity, it might turn out to be an exercise in surrealism and take us nowhere in our democratic odyssey. Many of the government actions are indeed praiseworthy, but the apparent politicisation inherent in ousting this or that politician from the arena has perhaps dampened public enthusiasm for elections somewhat.

In the thick of power, the ruling elite may not be able to sense it, but their appeal has been eroded because some of their steps fly in the face of public sentiments and aspirations. The people are again increasingly resigned to their fate -- a symptom not conducive to the flowering of democratic politics. The phenomenon is visible from the passivity of the people who do not react or protest in spite of their endless sufferings. Do the power-wielders ensconced in the safety of high offices hear the deafening sound of their mute silence and see the invisible writing on the wall?

Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BIIS.

A joke too far



M. J. AKBAR

WHICH of the two is funnier? Take your time, there is no hurry, for the competition is keen. If one of the gems is priceless, then the second can only be called invaluable. Ladies first, so let us quote Pakistan's Prime Minister-in-Waiting Ms. Benazir Bhutto. She called her rival Nawaz Sharif's attempt to return to Pakistan to contest elections "a mockery of democracy."

If this statement encouraged a belly laugh, as it should, then how do we react to the claim by Pakistan's Prime Minister-in-Exit-mode Shaukat Aziz? The dapper Mr. Aziz had this to say about Nawaz Sharif's brief stay at Islamabad airport, before he was deported to the ever-accommodating Saudi Arabia: "The government did not force Nawaz Sharif to return to Saudi Arabia. We did not force him. I have been told that he was given two options, either go to prison or proceed to Saudi Arabia."

There used to be a gentleman, or not very much of a gentleman, in Victorian England named Thomas Hobson. He used to hire out horses. If any customer wanted a horse, he had to take the one nearest the door or he would

not get any. The horses did not become famous, but Thomas Hobson did. His name is immortalised in the phrase "Hobson's Choice," which implies that you really have no choice. Shaukat Hobson Aziz's nuanced proposition to Nawaz Sharif would have pleased the old Englishman. Nawaz Sharif was not "forced." He was told, as rudely as possible (simply shoved into a bus and bumped into a waiting plane, while army commandos laughed and joked), that he could either return to a harsh prison in Pakistan or a gilded cage in Jeddah or Riyadh.

Careful observers will, of course, have noted that Shaukat Hobson Pontius Pilate Aziz has washed his hands of any suggestion that he might be involved in the persecution of Nawaz Sharif. The first lesson World Bank diplomats are taught is that governments might come and governments might go, but the World Bank lives on forever.

The only bank that Expectant Prime Minister Bhutto can depend upon is the vote bank left by her late father, Zulfiqar Ali, assassinated by the cruel rope of a flawed judicial process. She has depleted the Zulfiqar Bank resources substantially with a murky triangular deal between her and her individual self, Washington, and President Pervez Musharraf.

It takes some gall to describe a self-serving deal with army rule as restorative democracy, and dismiss Sharif's attempt to join the electoral process as a "mockery."

It says something about the state of Pakistan's polity when a lady who would be prime minister has to wait in Washington for permission to seek her nation's foremost executive post.

One has no idea who advises Benazir Bhutto, if, that is, anyone has the temerity to do so, but she might want to forget about the forty suitcases Nawaz Sharif apparently took with him when he was exiled seven years ago. Benazir Bhutto took away a whole English castle when she was turfed out by the army, not to mention fairly healthy bank accounts in Switzerland. Nawaz Sharif may indeed be as black as black money, but it does not behove a pot to call a kettle black.

What is quite extraordinary is the duplicity of the Pakistan People's Party over the legitimacy and authority of the nation's Supreme Court. PPP leaders, most notably the pre-eminent lawyer Aitzaz Ahsan, were in the forefront of this year's passionate, nationwide movement to restore Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry to office.

This struggle was said to have marked the beginning of a fresh chapter in Pakistan's democracy, and was certainly instrumental in Islamabad. But that is not quite

forcing the Army to compromise with civilian power. The moment Benazir Bhutto was offered the scint of office, she joined the army in trampling over an order of the Supreme Court permitting Nawaz Sharif to return home.

The Benazir argument, echoed by her parrots, that Mr. Sharif should stay away because of some verbal agreement made seven years ago, is specious and untenable. A Supreme Court's decision supersedes any private agreement that is disputed by one party and, in any event, has no basis in law.

Nawaz Sharif returned to Pakistan with the specific permission of the Supreme Court. The Pakistan People's Party has just dug a future grave by treating the Supreme Court so contemptuously.

President Pervez Musharraf is proving to be a far better tactician with politicians than his commitment to an army uniform might suggest. Ms. Benazir Bhutto is not even back in Pakistan and her credibility has already been eroded. General Musharraf has many disadvantages after more than seven years in power, but he does have one serious advantage in terms of public perception.

No one has accused him of being individually corrupt. He is unlikely to surrender that advantage by withdrawing corruption cases against either Benazir Bhutto or Nawaz Sharif. He might bend under pressure from his mentors in Washington, but one doubts if he will stoop so far.

Ms. Bhutto will not be deported when she returns to Pakistan in late October, since Washington insists upon some cosmetic changes in the power structure of Islamabad. But that is not quite

the same thing as re-gilding the lady in honest hues.

Now that Benazir Bhutto's People's Party has become the King's party, Nawaz Sharif will inherit the popular space along with those smaller parties who see merit in his continued confrontation with army rule. The most vocal of the latter is surely the former cricketer Imran Khan, who commands the attention of the media and makes effective public interventions.

Imran Khan possesses the virtue of clarity. He told President Musharraf fairly bluntly that it was about time he woke up. "If you think that by sending Mr. Nawaz Sharif to Saudi Arabia you can save your skin, you better stop fooling yourself. Neither can America save you, nor Benazir, and not even the PML(Q) turncoats ... God willing, the entire Pakistani nation will rise against you and we will fight you in the streets."

One can see a new political compass drawing fresh arcs: Benazir Bhutto, pro-Musharraf elements in Nawaz Sharif's party and America are placed in one group; Nawaz Sharif and friends are now the legitimate opposition. It may be too early to claim that the entire Pakistani nation has joined this opposition. But presumably God, whose will Imran Khan has invoked, will soon let us know -- through events on the Pakistani street rather than deals in the Islamabad secretariat.

M.J. Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

Neutralising politics of the corrupt

NO NONSENSE



have always carried a peculiar fascination for political clowns. I enjoy watching them embarrass themselves as they shamelessly court public's favor. But the acts of the two condescending politicians, Hannan Shah and Delwar Hossain, and their emergence as ardent loyalists of Khaleda Zia are no amusing matter -- they want dynastic rule and reign of the corrupt back again. What's wrong with them?

Delwar Hossain's prankishness, when he was chief whip, went down as low as reportedly grabbing family groceries day after day from parliament cafeteria (plus

inevitable consequence of shared attributes (birds of a feather) that all four BNP higher ups not only committed some form of mischief themselves, but also raised sons who are detained and waiting trial for various crimes of indiscretions.

The deportment is certainly unethical in all its facets if not an outright crime of larceny. Then, of course there is Hannan Shah who is on bail from extortion charges. To say nothing of tax evasions on undisclosed black money by Khaleda Zia and Saifur Rahman. One wonders whether it's simply an fortuitous coincidence or the

mised if the country's former President and the founding Secretary General of BNP Badruddoza Chowdhury joins that fact.

From their statements it's now avowed that BNP leaders in the Moulvibazar district and others who insist upon Khaleda's unconditional release from captivity are mindlessly committed to the paradigm of dynastic politics of Zia family. When they talked about allegiance to BNP's ideology and its principles do they really know what these are?

Not too long ago I had a chat with one MP at a friend's house in New York who pressed that he joined BNP for its ideology and Zia's principles. When I quipped, "How do they differ from those of Awami league or Jatiya Party," he appeared taken aback.

I also requested his comments on if non-recognition of Bangabandhu as the father of the nation, dynastic politics of Zia family, and politicisation of the country's institutions constitute the ideological tenets of BNP? At that

point, our host interrupted the exchanges by calling us to the dinner table.

It is increasingly becoming obvious that the politics of the corrupt are inexorable. How in the world can any government eliminate the corrupt from the political process when the people of the country and politicians who are relatively honest demand unconditional release of their alleged corrupt leaders without due legal process?

While Hasina's transgressions are yet to be confirmed by the court, Khaleda could have been sentenced 8 to 10 years for tax evasion had the charges against her been filed before NBR's tax amnesty or if she was barred from tax amnesty for reasons of being already under criminal investigations.

Instead of being remorseful before boarding the prison van she was grandstanding about her innocence and fantasised conspiracies against her family's future politics.

She said, "Today, they are conspiring not only against me, but also

against the country and its people. The conspirators are out to jeopardise the independence and sovereignty of the country and stop the democratic forward march by hindering the electoral process."

What crass and puerile statements these are? How nonsensical are the suggestions that corruption charges against her and son Arif are a plot to split the BNP and keep her family away from the country's future politics?

What makes her think that her sons have a future in the country's politics? She possibly measures their eligibility and aptitude relative to her own -- they at least received high school diploma and acquired all the proficiencies of committing corruption, extortion and what not. Besides, her sons have so many adherents of "a same feather" everywhere who espouse "dynastic politics."

Most importantly, there is no death of Hannan, Delwar and their likes everywhere who still endorse Khaleda's leadership and her sons' lineage to political power.

Just the other day, Delwar and

Hannan indicated non-participation in EC's election related discussions until and unless Khaleda is set free. Acting AL President Zillur Rahman has also echoed the same in favor of Sheikh Hasina.

One wonders if these are simply tendentious rhetoric or pigheaded attempts to generate public sympathy. Before these noises gain any momentum the mass media may neutralise them by repeated reporting that none of the post 1/11 big name prisoners are political prisoners -- they're detained for alleged crimes of corruption, extortion and murder.

For the government, what is the essence is a court verdict establishing at least one charge against each top leader of the two parties immediately justifying their incarceration while framing other charges as expeditiously as possible. As they say, "once you cut the head the body dies." Don't forget: Justice delayed may take wrong twists and turns.

Dr. Abdullah A. Dewan is Professor of Economics at Eastern Michigan University.