

An appeal to the chief adviser to salvage Biman

CAPT. A. M. MAQSOOD AHMED.

THE recent changes in Biman have been brought about in such haste that it is blurring to an observer. Whether these changes are really going to make positive impact on the future of Biman remains to be seen.

But honourable chief adviser, we are immensely worried that whatever is in plan for Biman may prove to be too little too late, unless every detail of the recovery plan has already been chalked out with defined time-frame within which to achieve them.

A look towards the jail will give anyone the idea why Biman is struggling for its existence today. All of the last three ministers in charge of the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism are behind bars. Sadly, many of the people who were behind the looting of Biman are still free and in business. Biman never enjoyed the love and respect of a national carrier from any of the previous governments.

"Losing," "inefficient," "corrupt," "over-stuffed," these are the words I have frequently heard from every corner of the society, mostly from the

people who are behind the organisation's present predicament. When was the last time Biman received a state financial grant?

In the recent past there was only one grant of Tk 150 crore against a legitimate demand of Tk 1,200 crore. Biman's dues from the government. Other than that I don't remember any other grant by the government. Without any investment how do we expect profit?

Contrary to popular belief, Biman probably was always in profit and the people in power were gobbling up a large chunk of that profit and more. They approved purchase of equipments to receive kickbacks and seldom for the benefit of Biman. Appointment of people like Mr. Mir Md. Nasiruddin as the minister for civil aviation and tourism sends out a message to everyone that the organisation is open for plunder.

And the question remains, how Mr. Shamim Eskander is still free after what has been published in the media about him, his wife, and his brother-in-law? We have seen the milking of Biman by him, how he will be brought to justice is up to the law enforcement agencies.

It is my request to you to trust the ability of the organisation to run

efficiently. Appointment of an operator is unnecessary and an insult to our ability. Biman management is well capable of making full use of the immense potential of this sector in Bangladesh.

Let Biman independently shape its own future without any intervention from the government. If the ability of the management is considered inadequate, appoint a specialist CEO, or consultant(s). All Biman needs is an interest-free loan to pay down payment for purchase, lease with the option to purchase, and operational lease of at least ten new generation aircraft, and a state sovereign guarantee against the purchase options.

And, of course, total freedom and accountability in its management. Today Biman management does not have responsibility and authority, and as such, it is not accountable to the government and the people. This arrangement suited the corrupt governments but has to change now.

Today the DC-10s are stressed to the limit. These aircrafts are made to fly more than 14 hours in a 24 hour cycle against a normal 10 to 11 hours. While machines are there to be used, they can be unforgiving to the people mishandling them. We are getting

away with small and reversible incidents and occurrences, but if the warning signs are not respected, we may have to pay with our lives.

In almost every flight we encounter technical problems due to which flights are delayed. Airport authorities in Dubai, Jeddah, Riyadh, and Kuwait have already expressed their dissatisfaction over the inevitable delay of almost all Biman flights.

Regarding accountability, we are miles apart from that noble concept. Once inside an airplane, the passengers are our responsibility. What do we tell them about a delay in excess of two days? We do not tell them anything. We do not have words for the greatest of assets of this country, the foreign currency earners, who, despite all the harassments and possibility of visa expiry, choose to travel by their national airline.

Management doesn't have the resources, so they cannot be made accountable. We, the pilots, do not have a monthly schedule, and we fly on daily basis, so we cannot be made accountable. Only the poor passengers of the airline have to take the brunt of the negligence of the national carrier. Honourable chief adviser, this has to change. We are looking forward to your guidance in

this respect.

With my inadequate knowledge regarding the business of aviation, I would request you to consider the following steps:

- Ask Biman management to contact either of the two major manufacturers, Airbus and/or Boeing for assistance in business plan and recovery strategy. All the major airlines are directly in business with either or both these manufacturers.
- Allocate adequate fund to implement a long-term business strategy based on pragmatic business solution. We must understand that the aviation industry is now experiencing a boom like the boom in garments sectors during the early eighties. For it is now or never.
- Extend full authority to Biman management and demand results. Establish accountability.
- Extend state sovereign guaranty against arranged loans, and fund as much as practicable. (My experienced guess is that a state allocation of \$200 million spread over the next two fiscal years shall be adequate to put Biman on a firm platform from where it can dictate terms in the business).
- Appoint specialist CEO or consultants, who can tap the right



resources.

- Last but not the least, instruct the concerned authorities to take into consideration the interest of the national airline during all air service agreements. During the recent times Biman's interest has been ignored

time and again.

Honourable chief adviser, here is an excerpt from William Wadsworth Longfellow: "Lives of great men all teach us/We can make our lives sublime/And, departing, leave behind us/Footprints on the sand the sands

of time."

Inadequate people made inadequate choices in the past. Sir, let us rise above them and make a change.

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Searching for leadership

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

BETTER late than never. The CTG has realised that merely attempting reforms or improving the law and order situation or bringing corrupt political stalwarts to book will not help it much in achieving its ultimate goal: i.e. holding a free, fair and credible election on a level playing field. No more new reform programs in future. All preparations must now aim at holding national elections at the earliest. It all depends now on how far the EC is capable of implementing the roadmap for the election.

Let us not hesitate to state that the EC has not yet been able to impress us with any deed, except the good quality voter identity cards. It could not free itself from the executive, i.e. the PMO. Thus, the detractors may

feel that the danger of rigging of election through officers on deputation still remains.

Not much time is left for political dialogue. Without political discussions at grass-roots level (which needs total lifting of the ban on politics), the reform efforts of the EC may not be very meaningful and effective. What appears to be fairly simple may prove otherwise in the field, because the junior leaders may not react as anticipated by the seniors.

During the last eight months, we have considered various aspects of political activities without active participation of Khaleda and Hasina, who are in sub-jail. Both AL and BNP are having some problems about reforming their parties. While division appears inevitable in the case of BNP and JP, things are not as bad in the AL camp.

With regard to other minor parties, the pro-Islami parties may not be able to play any significant role in the election. The 14-party alliance may ultimately side with AL. Among the newly emerging parties, BNP (Mannan group) is in consultation with Dr. B. Chowdhury, and Col. (ret'd) Oli Ahmed may form some party. Dr. Qureshi's PDP may also play some meaningful part in the election.

The AL, JP, JSD, IL, and CPB have opened their central offices on lifting of the ban on indoor politics. However, BNP appears to be less fortunate. It has not yet (at time of writing) been allowed to open its office. It appears that unless the following points are settled the party may not be allowed to open its office because of the strong possibility of violent clashes between two groups

of BNP over the possession of the office:

- Whether the expulsion of former secretary general, Mr. Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, and joint secretary, Mr. Nazrul Islam, by the chairperson is legally valid or not. Does such an act need approval of the councilors as per BNP constitution? Whether issue of show cause notices were necessary?
- Whether the chairperson can appoint the general secretary and joint secretary without any consultation with, or approval of, the councilors?
- How to avoid the possibility of violence over the possession of offices and other facilities.

The problem with BNP is that it was founded by a military dictator for his own political existence. It had to be formed in a hurry. Without Zia, it was

not even a faction. Due to the assassination of Zia, everything became void. Khaleda was installed as the chief of the party to save it from disintegration. Khaleda is performing the task like her dictator husband. Between 1996 and 2000, a large number of businessmen joined the party to make their fortune. They have little or no interest in holding important posts in the party.

After its historical win in the 2001 election, Khaleda, for no good reason, formed the alliance with the Jamaat-e-Islami. It was the greatest blunder in her political career. She was even advised by some eminent members of civil society not to go for any alliance, when her party alone had won 190 seats in the parliament. Unfortunately, she turned a deaf ear to such advice. The party got its first shock when an eminent member like

Dr. B. Chowdhury resigned. Later on, the resignation of Col. (ret'd) Oli Ahmed was the second jolt. Khaleda ignored these resignations because of her wrong notion that anybody outside BNP was not worth much.

Khaleda never considered any need for reform of the party. There is enough reason to suspect her attitude toward democracy. Without any prior consultation, she appointed her eldest son as joint secretary, a position not included in the BNP constitution. With no experience in politics, and not enough academic qualification, Tarique was given the difficult task of reorganising the BNP at the grass-roots level. By assigning such a task to an unqualified person, she betrayed her serious lack of political knowledge. If one analyses her life between 1990 and 2006, he will realise the truth in Mark Twain's

quotation: "All you need in this life is ignorance and confidence, and then success is sure." She may be ignorant but she has confidence, and what to say about her success in politics.

With BNP in tatters, AL may be able to patch up its differences through apt handling by Mr. Zillur Rahman Siddique and Mr. Amir Hossein Annu. In JP, Barrister Anisul Islam will be able to gain control with assistance from Ershad.

Pro-Islami parties, including IL, may not be an important factor because of their alliance partner's miserable plight. The 14-party alliance may support AL, and the 11-party in the name of Democratic Left Alliance (DLA) will help in establishing democracy in Bangladesh. We may have to wait for a final decision about formation of a new party consisting Dr. B. Chowdhury, Oli

Ahmed, and Mannan Bhuiyan.

Despite optimism of the EC about a successful election, the following questions must be considered:

- Who could lead the major political parties if the present chiefs are punished by the court before election.
- If adequate number of qualified contestants are not found, how to overcome the problem.
- Whether some deliberations may be made about the possibility of a council of learned advisers.

Frankly speaking, common people are not clear about politics beyond 2008. If enough national level leaders are not found, we may compromise with the quality of the future leaders. This needs determination of an acceptable standard by EC in consultation with the CTG.

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Liberty of talking at random

KAZI ALAUDDIN AHMED

"DICTION" and "contradiction" are two words conveying at least one thing in common. Both have the self-same positive feature. The first word means "manner of enunciation." And the second denotes "opposing verbally." One enunciates and the other opposes, the former is positively "positive" and the latter is positively "negative."

Quite interestingly, "diction" or, for that matter, the "manner of enunciation" can, at times, be an act of "contradiction" all by itself. And it is abusive if there is any submerged element of cajoling or infatuation directed to an unresponsive end. Such an unsolicited conjecture on the part of any one at the helm of affairs can create an unwelcome augury among his beholders.

It is instantly dismissed as being devoid of the scruples befitting such gentlemen -- who are otherwise reasonably acceptable to their listeners

-- belonging to both the intellectual and the ordinary sections of the citizenry.

The strength of the present government can be primarily attributed to the multi-dimensional faculties of its collective leadership. Till now, it has been enjoying almost universal support of the people. This can be described as the most vital component of the overall strength and formidability of the administration. Any government worth its name is composed of all the administrative divisions, including the armed services, and all the components of the law-enforcing agency.

Talking of a "national government," one invariably assumes an extraordinary situation in the country. "National government" is a term ascribed to a type of government composed of eminent people belonging to different political ideologies, intellectuals, educationists, social activists, diverse professionals etc; and yet all will have one thing in common, that is a unity of purpose. It

is absolute allegiance to the sovereignty of a nation. In the history of governments across the world there have not been many instances of such institutions donning the colours of a national government per se.

Perhaps the first of this type of government was installed in the United Kingdom during the Second World War. More precisely, the Labour Party headed by Clement Attlee and the Conservative Party led by Winston Churchill joined hands in a highly volatile situation obtaining in all the European countries in particular, and elsewhere in the world in general (1941-45). Such a government in the United Kingdom saw Attlee as the prime minister and Churchill as a cabinet member at the peak of the war in 1945.

Considered against this historical background of a "national government," the present government in Bangladesh does not have the stipulated traits. The appreciation proffered by an adviser to the govern-

ment in the later part of the preceding month didn't tally with the distinctive features of a "national government." His claim that the present government, supported by the armed forces, was a national government didn't find favour with the army chief himself.

The latter straightway disagreed with the contention of the adviser, and quite firmly opined that the present government was nothing more than a caretaker government or an interim government. He also added that the armed services were an integral part of the civil administration and, for that matter, of the government as a whole.

Still then, the magnitude of involvement of the army in enforcing law and order, in relief operations for the flood-affected countrymen, and in providing almost yeoman service to the Election Commission with regard to preparation of a flawless voter list and national identity card can be termed unprecedented.

So, the apparent contradiction

between the two statements has indeed been a positive acknowledgement of totally identical national values. The only difference is in the approach and appreciation of the issue at hand. In any case, we are now going through a very welcome interregnum, which, if sustained with due care, shall herald in a new era for the whole nation.

Phonetically, we can have a glimpse of the historical bias embracing yet another connotation of the original word "nation." Curiously enough, the term "national" promotes a broader perspective and significance to freely emulate the word "nationalist," which conveys a highly orthodox as well as repulsive phenomenon.

It claims rigid adherence to a set policy of national independence, without ensuring total or absolute support of the people belonging to that particular nation. They are so very obsessed and pampered with the spirit of nationalism that, sooner or later, they come into ideological

clash with the liberal section of the society. They are seized by a weird spirit of extremism, almost fringing upon rude regimentation of the people at large.

Among the most noted exponents of "nationalism," we have Dr. Sun Yat Sen (1867-1926) as the pioneer, as recorded in history. He was the founder and first president of the Chinese Republic in 1912, resigning almost immediately in favour of Yuan Shih Kai.

Subsequent to the successful National Revolution in 1911, he founded the People's National Party in 1912. Sun Yat Sen sought to establish a democratic republic modelled on western parliamentary democracy and, in his famous "Testament," laid down the principles upon which the constitution of China was to be based.

After his death in 1925, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek took over as the president of China, being a powerful member of the national party known as Kuomintang Party.

Beginning as a Russian-inspired revolutionary movement, Kuomintang developed into a reactionary oligarchy and collapsed in 1949 when the nationalist forces suffered military defeat by the communists led by Mao Tse-Tung. Mao became the first chairman of the People's Republic of China, driving Chiang Kai-Shek out of the mainland to Taiwan.

In the Indian sub-continent, during the pre-partition days and even decades after August 1947, the "nationalists" couldn't shake-off their "reactionary" surname. The scar on the face of the so-called "nationalists," though invisible beneath the dust of time, arouses doubt even today. The example set by Chiang Kai-Shek and his followers as "nationalists" is yet to be effaced totally.

In an altogether different situation, but born in an almost identical spirit, one may discover some of the age-old features of the "nationalists" among many of the promoters

here in Bangladesh.

Though "national," "nationalism" and "nationalist" are derived from the word "nation," they convey, at times, intriguingly different features where the thematic value of "nation" is often distorted. The dogmatic approach to "nationalism," or to "nationalist" philosophy as enunciated or foreseen by Dr. Sun Yat Sen, suffered the first shock at the hands of Chiang Kai-Shek and, till now, such aberration persists with many of its so-called patrons.

We have a strange coincidence in the thought-provoking message left for posterity by the great English poet William Cowper (1731-1800) in these lines: "The age of virtuous politics is past, and we are deep in that of cold pretence. Patriots are grown too shrewd, to be sincere, and we too wise to trust them." Here "nationalism" and patriotism are synonymous.

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With friends like George

CHRISTIAN CARYL

HE started his term in office offering a fresh new start -- a forceful young nationalist and the first Japanese prime minister to be born after the second world war. It all ended last week with Shinzo Abe looking very much like a broken man, his eyes welling with tears as he gave his farewell speech before checking into a hospital for "exhaustion."

Though dogged by a string of cabinet scandals and political missteps, the issue that brought him down in the end was his support for America in the new world war, the one on terror.

Ironically, given that Abe had built his political reputation, and early popularity, on hawkish and pro-American policies. Now he has joined the ranks of colleagues including Spain's José María Aznar, Italy's Silvio Berlusconi and Britain's Tony Blair, who found themselves pushed out of power when their support for America's wars lost traction with their own

countrymen.

Others, from Pakistan's Pervez Musharraf to Australia's John Howard, face rising popular discontent over their ties to George W. Bush, but still hold their jobs. Abe was the first to fall in Asia for his friendship with Bush.

Not that the Japanese are suddenly turning against their old ally. They remain very pro-American, polls show. But they are revolting, in the European way, against Bush's priorities -- the War on Terror and its battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan. And they are distancing themselves from playing a military role.

In polls the Japanese routinely express approval of their half-century-old alliance with the United States, despite lingering irritation over the stationing of American forces on Japanese territory and the vast sums Tokyo pays to keep them there. But in recent months, ordinary Japanese have grown weary of Abe's ambition to restore Japanese stature by, for example, easing restrictions on the pacifist postwar Constitution on sending Japanese troops abroad.



Washington, eager for more Japanese support in places like Iraq, fully supported the constitutional revision. But Japanese voters wanted Abe to focus on problems at home: endangered pensions, widening social inequality and shaky health care.

By the end, Abe had simply drifted too close to the Bush worldview, in which the War on Terror is priority No. 1. Following a meeting with Bush

during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in Sydney, Abe vowed in public to stake his office on a controversial law enabling Japanese forces to provide logistical support to America and its allies in the war in Afghanistan.

Three days later, he was blaming his surprise decision to resign on the intransigence of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan, which refused to back him up. But it was

Abe who left sounding intransigent as he insisted that "Japan must continue its fight against terrorism under a new prime minister."

Yet it need not -- at least, not like Abe had. Abe simply wasn't listening to a public that had turned on even limited Japanese support for the war. The law in question allowed Japanese ships stationed in the Indian Ocean to fuel American and allied vessels involved with the war in

Afghanistan.

Abe's popular predecessor, Junichiro Koizumi, pushed it through Parliament in 2001 as part of his show of support for America after 9/11. No one questioned it until Abe's dramatic slide in popularity in recent months made him vulnerable on the issue. In watershed July elections, the opposition DPJ gained a majority in the upper house of Parliament, and soon DPJ leader Ichiro Ozawa was warning that he would derail plans to extend the law.

Suddenly, many voices were questioning Japan's overseas deployments. Most Japanese still favor the alliance with the United States, even as recent polls by the Asahi Shimbun newspaper show that up to 53 percent of the population oppose the Indian Ocean refueling. (Japan had also sent a contingent of troops to Iraq, but most were withdrawn before Abe came to office.)

When asked whether the remaining Japanese Air Force troops in Iraq should be kept there, 69 percent said "no," Kenji Eda, an independent

member of Parliament who is also working to block the law that permits the Indian Ocean deployment, is surprised by the intensity of support for his position. Surprised, he says, because people tend to support the alliance.

Something is changing. Under Koizumi, discussion of Japan's participation in the global War on Terror never reached a critical stage. Now the mounting discontent could form into a backlash. Public enthusiasm for Abe's plans to ease constitutional limits on the military has cooled noticeably.

A blue-ribbon commission appointed by Abe to study the possibility of giving Tokyo greater latitude to deploy troops in operations with its American allies has essentially run out of steam. "It's too big a tilt," says MIT professor Richard Samuels. "It's carrying America's war for them and nobody's in the mood for that right now." As in Europe, Japanese want their leader to put their own issues first.

Just how much damage this does to the broader US-Japanese relation-

ship remains to be seen. Whoever succeeds Abe as his party's leader will face pressure to call a general election, setting up a campaign in which Ozawa will likely play the antiwar card for all it's worth.

"How he plays it and how the Americans play it is very important," says Gerald Curtis, a Japan expert at Columbia University. "If it looks like the Americans are trying to push the Japanese around and tell the Japanese how to run their foreign policy, Ozawa benefits."

Kuni Miyake, a former diplomat and president of the AOI Foreign Policy Institute in Tokyo, says of the two feuding political parties: "Both sides have passed the point of no return. It's a game of chicken. Probably there will be a collision." It is hoped Japan's friendship with the United States will survive intact. But future prime ministers, like colleagues around the world, are likely to avoid spending too much time in Bush's company.

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