

Stepping back from PSI

Government has shown respect to public sentiment

THE decision by the Bangladesh government and the visiting team of the International Monetary Fund not to negotiate a deal on the IMF's Policy Support Instrument is a step that will be welcomed by broad sections of people in Bangladesh. One reason for that is that both sides have taken clear note of public opinion about the PSI and have, therefore, acted in accordance with public sentiment. In the last several days, some leading economists as well as media experts have pointed out the probable negative fall-out of any Dhaka-IMF deal that might have been reached on the issue. Overall, therefore, this move by the government and the IMF to step back from the PSI issue has been a good instance of rethink on their part and will certainly go down well with the nation.

We note here, of course, that earlier the adviser for finance had assured the country that no deal that ran contrary to national interests would be agreed to by the government, indeed that any deal, if reached, would be made public. It now appears that the government has indeed been circumspect in its move and has acted in its own wisdom. We will expect that in future, governments in Bangladesh will take cognisance of the hopes and aspirations of the nation and will therefore do nothing that may be seen as compromising autonomy in national policy making. In this connection, we might add that in recent years the perception has grown that there is a preponderance of the wishes of the Bretton Woods institutions in the shaping of Bangladesh's economic policies and programmes. One can hardly deny the consequences that such actions as an abrupt closure of jute mills and a privatisation of banks have caused in the social sector. In simple terms, the social costs resulting from policies adopted as a result of donor advice have been rather high considering our socio-economic realities.

It is encouraging to know from the governor of the Bangladesh Bank that henceforth no tightening of monetary policy will be pursued. On the contrary, a relaxation of policy will ensure a flow of credit to the private sector. The effects on the economy should therefore be positive. It is thus a clear indication of the nature of policy formulation the government intends to follow.

Drug administration needs streamlining

It's key to public health

DRUG Administration (DA) is the sole authority of the government entrusted with the task of standardising manufacture of drugs in the country, with an emphasis on quality assurance and the pricing aspect. Of late, it has been revealed through the media that this important organisation had been overlooked and neglected by governments for years. The DA has been in perennial shortage of manpower that has led to the near breakdown of its monitoring system. It is indeed suffering from acute budgetary constraints. We wonder as to how the organisation with its 178 supervisory staff can monitor a drug market worth Tk 500 crore. As a result it is forced to leave two-thirds of the drug market unchecked. The drug authority has only 32 supervisors, overseeing price control and manufacturing companies producing substandard and spurious drugs.

To complicate matters DA officials have no enforcement authority (magistracy power) and are paid ridiculous amount of allowances to carry out their field operations. Moreover the two drug testing laboratories, one in Dhaka and the other in Chittagong are unable to operate properly due to lack of manpower and qualified technicians with machines, equipment and appliances worth crores of Taka lying idle.

The drug administration is too valuable an organisation to be left in such a state of neglect. Drugs are key to public healthcare involving the lives of all sections of the population. Let us not forget we have a highly reputable tradition in the pharmaceuticals sphere and there are some first rate industries exporting quality medicine abroad. In this context, we are concerned about the growth of some spurious drug manufacturing companies. We are also concerned about alleged rise in prices of various life saving and other drugs.

We urge the government to revamp the drug administration. Surely access to quality drugs and medicines at affordable prices is the inalienable right of every citizen.

Leadership bankruptcy

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

I feel it was time that the young bloods were entrusted with task of running the political parties and indeed the politics of the country. Without meaning any disrespect to our senior politicians, it was time they realised that the time is come to pass on the baton. We have not run out of good materials and there are plenty of them in our polity. If they have not flourished it is because they were not allowed to by those whose ideas and beliefs have become ossified.

Brig Gen
SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

THAT there was dearth of good political leaders in Bangladesh there was no doubt, but one was not sure how bad the situation was till the other day. Two developments have brought the issue of leadership bankruptcy to the fore. It has exposed a grave situation encumbered by the depletion of the pool of leaders that party men could call upon. That is the case of at least one leading political party.

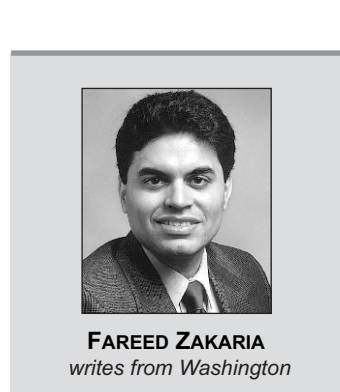
The way some in this particular party, or certain factions of it to be exact, are trying to invoke the help of their "veteran leaders" to take up the reins and salvage them by lending their image to their party would make any Bangladeshi feel despondent at the pauperisation of leadership in Bangladesh. These are tried and tested people who in the public eye have been dismal failures, particularly because of the moral depravity that they had sunk into. Neither their "qualities" nor their "image" can be helpful to anybody; if anything it will be to the contrary.

It is also interesting to read about the scramble for a gentleman who was most unceremoniously cast aside from the highest office of the land by his party men. Not only that, he had to move around like a hounded fugitive to escape the clutches of the party thugs set upon him by none other than the person who is now reportedly seeking his help.

Politics makes strange bedfellows but in Bangladesh politics have made immoral expediency a virtue; and politics has been made a calling in which its practitioners had rejoiced in the practice of iniquity. It cannot get any worse than when to us, the common person, it appears that the standard for qualifying as a leader, fit to take up a senior party post, is to have a record of misuse of official position, of dabbling in unethical practices, of having one's kin in custody of the law accused of dealing in hijacked cars, illegal occupation of property, and extortion.

Therefore it was not surprising

Go down in Iraq, but go along



THERE is a central contradiction in almost every defense of the surge that I have heard or read. More troops and a new counterinsurgency strategy were meant to improve security so that Iraqi politicians could then reconcile. But the most important evidence cited to prove the surge's success shows that the process works the opposite way.

Gen. David Petraeus said last week that the "most significant development of the past eight months" was the alliance with local tribes in Anbar province, a tactic that has now spread elsewhere. In Anbar, local Sunni groups and the American military working together have regained great swaths of territory from Qaeda forces.

This is a big deal, moving the most dangerous and unstable part of the country toward relative calm. But political success is what led to military success, not the

Iraq is going to have to find its political balance. The United States might propel Iraqi leaders to do so by relinquishing our dominant security role, scaring them into compromise, just as we and the Sunnis were pushed to make up. In any event, that's something we will have to test, and there is little to be gained from waiting.

other way around.

In their retelling of the battle for Anbar, administration officials say the Sunnis of the region -- disgusted by Al Qaeda's methods -- gathered forces and saved their province from the perfidious jihadists. There's some truth to this, but, as is often the case in Iraq, the whole story is a bit more complicated.

The United States had largely alienated Iraq's Sunnis by engaging not simply in regime change but also revolution. It disbanded all elements of the old order in which Sunnis were dominant -- the Army, the bureaucracy, the state-owned enterprises -- and watched passively as purges and ethnic cleansing mounted. By late 2004 some US officials recognised that they needed to draw even radical Sunnis, who dominated the insurgency, into the new Iraq.

The then Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, a secular Shiite, encouraged this shift. Many Sunnis were also beginning to recognise that they had made a mistake and made some overtures to the United States. But hard-line Shiite politicians in Baghdad and hard-line American officials argued

vehemently against any contact with the enemy. Plus, the Sunnis who would step into the mainstream kept getting killed.

Yet failure followed failure, Shiite militias ran rampant, and the Sunni areas of Iraq, particularly Anbar, seemed lost. So the United States began talking to the Sunnis, despite concerns about their links to the insurgency. "This was a tough move for everyone," says one senior US official, who was not allowed to speak on the record. "People had to start dealing with the enemy, or at least the people we had convinced ourselves were the enemy." This political shift produced an alliance that then made military gains possible.

The surge has proved that more troops can produce enhanced security -- are you listening, Mr. Rumsfeld? -- but it is a holding operation. Eventually American troops will have to leave. What will cement the security in those places that we control now is a political deal among various factions in which they're all invested in stability.

Without such a power-sharing agreement, the order we build will

only proves that we get the leaders we deserve.

The incarceration and the trial of so many top leaders of the two major parties ought to be in keeping with the popular demand to cleanse our politics. It would be bizarre if these were driven by ulterior motives with a particular outcome in mind. It would be undesirable too if particular characters were strutted up directly or indirectly as an alternative to the major political parties. Sponsored parties or their leaders have very little commitment other than looking at ways and means to perpetuate their existence. In the process they tend to serve their mentors and not the country, till such time they think they have gained enough clout to discard them. That initiates another fresh cycle of conflict and uncertainty. Bangladesh can ill afford that.

Why can't our leaders follow the examples of countries around us? Look at Japan. Whatever may have been the underlying causes for his resignation, Prime Minister Abe felt that he did not have the trust of the electorates to continue as the prime minister any longer, because "under the current circumstances it is difficult to proceed steadily with policies in terms of public support and trust" and resolved the situation by "drawing a line." And the only dignified thing to do was to resign. Not in Bangladesh. We do not know when to draw the line. Instead we stick to the position as if it was a personal possession.

Our leaders will do well to keep in

mind what an American economist had advised: "A political leader must keep looking over his shoulder all the time to see if the boys are still there. If they aren't still there, he's no longer a political leader." If some of our leaders had bothered to look over their shoulders they would know what to do.

I feel it was time that the young bloods were entrusted with task of running the political parties and indeed the politics of the country. Without meaning any disrespect to our senior politicians, it was time they realised that the time is come to pass on the baton. We have not run out of good materials and there are plenty of them in our polity. If they have not flourished it is because they were not allowed to by those whose ideas and beliefs have become ossified.

We have had to suffer crisis of leadership for a long time now. The need of the time is for younger people with fresh ideas, particularly those who can rise above human frailties and earthly greed to take the country forward. We want leaders who, to paraphrase Lincoln, would be statesmen, not concerned with the next election only but with the future generations also.

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into compromise, just as we and the Sunnis were pushed to make up. In any event, that's something we will have to test, and there is little to be gained from waiting.

One point the president made last week was fresh and important. We have strategic, political and moral reasons to remain involved - as long as the Iraqis request it. The most significant way we can help Iraq is to be there for the long haul, assisting it economically and politically, but maintaining a much smaller, more enduring military presence.

That is a far more strategic role for US troops than policing the streets of Baghdad. Making clear that we aren't going to disappear entirely will change the calculus of

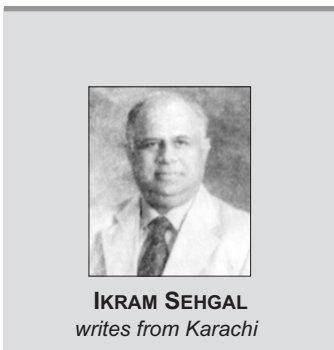
all those groups in Iraq that are keeping their "post-American" options open.

The president is wasting his limited political capital buying the surge a few more months. There is a much more important deal to be had here -- go down in troop levels, but go long. If you listen to leading Democrats, most recognise the need for a smaller, longer American mission in Iraq. But to get there, President Bush has to recognise that the mission of 130,000 American troops in Iraq -- for better or worse -- is done.

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The end of the tunnel



PAKISTAN'S future is being played out this week in a courtroom drama in the Supreme Court (SC). With the "doctrine of necessity" now an evil phrase in Pakistani legal lexicon, how will SC interpret the laws, will technicality triumph or will pragmatism?

We are familiar with two extremes: dictatorship without accountability and democracy without check, what Pakistan really needs is an in-between genuine "power-sharing" arrangement.

When stray rumours about Musharraf-Bhutto "power-sharing deal" started to circulate from early this year, Mian Nawaz Sharif became apprehensive about being left as the odd man out in "the eternal triangle."

AS I SEE IT

Musharraf has recently said that the "Elections 2007" will decide Pakistan's destiny, one believes it is the way the elections are conducted that will decide the country's destiny. Musharraf has both the vision and courage to fulfil this "destiny," one might add, while he is still the master of the game! Even though the light at the end of the tunnel reveals a sign-board reading "power-sharing is a must for Pakistan," it will be useless if the power players in Pakistan choose to ignore it.

The last time around he had explored the possibility of becoming Amir-ul-Momineen, for the "born-again" democrat political survival was the prime motive behind his trying to bring all the political parties together in London on one platform.

Inadvertently Musharraf helped the Opposition coalesce by attempting to sack the Chief Justice (CJ), Mr. Iftikhar Chaudhry. To quote my article of May 10, 2007: "At the crossroads, [...] there is seething resentment among the masses at the attitude of some among the ruling clique, particularly the agencies, that they can get away with anything. As for president's close advisors the less said the better. Every time he listens to them and their advice is usually motivated, he

gets into trouble, and the country along with him gets into a crisis. The president has been inadvertently placed at a critical crossroads only a few months before his re-election as president. The honourable CJ's defiance will make power-sharing come about sooner than later, in this arrangement one believes Pervez Musharraf still has a role to play."

The manhandling of the CJ galvanised the lawyer community. In the cover of their struggle the political parties discovered that their voice started to matter, force-multiplied manifold by the media joining the wolf-pack of those literally baying for Musharraf's blood.

When the political parties finally met in London, PPP played coy. Ms. Benazir, who was in London at

glossed over.

When the truth came out later it damaged Sharif's credibility. Mian Nawaz Sharif's option became limited to only one; announcing the date of his return to the country. While in his heart of hearts Sharif knew he would be deported, he would have been politically dead if he had not attempted to return.

The "unarmed combat" principle, to use the enemy's strength against him is generally known as the "judo ploy," former commando Pervaz Musharraf is adept at this. The attempted return to Pakistan of Mian Nawaz Sharif became a defining moment for Musharraf, any sign of weakness would have caused a meltdown of his support, some had already deserted, and many were ready to switch sides.

The international media in attendance gave a set-piece opportunity to the "boss" to display his power, contempt of the SC notwithstanding. Musharraf's "show of force" in packing the former PM off back to Saudi Arabia was a deliberate and a clear signal to friend and foe alike that he was not going to roll over and play dead. Many wavering on the fail-safe line became "born-again" Musharraf supporters.

The ball is now in the SC's court. Mr. Akram Shaikh's attempt to get a

full Bench to hear the case indicated that he felt that the 8-member Bench announced by the CJ was weighted in Musharraf's favour. That plea, despite "discussion," was rejected, confirming the apprehensions of the Opposition.

In the meantime the election commission "cleared" the technicalities of the uniform, what will the SC do? In a sudden move Musharraf made the issue of the uniform almost infructuous by a categorical filling before the SC about doffing the uniform before he takes oath of office as president.

He follows the teachings of Germany's Commando Extraordinary Col Otto Von Skorzeny: "If man be the weapon, the bullet the weapon fires must be surprise." A mixed verdict is perhaps in the offing, re-election in uniform will be out but he would be eligible to do so without it.

The president is using the uniform as a bargaining ploy; concerns about legitimacy within and outside the country will ensure that he will fight the election without the uniform.

One expects he will doff the uniform on or before October 8, 2007. Election from the present Assemblies is in fact the real issue other than the time-bar, Musharraf

has succeeded in his strategic objective using diversionary tactics embroiling the Opposition in extraneous issues.

Except for the National Assembly (NA), none of the other Assemblies make up the Electoral College, their members do. If the NWFP Assembly is dissolved as threatened by the Opposition, the presidential elections can still proceed.

Paraphrasing Mark Twain's reaction when he was told about news of his death being circulated, I had written: "The rumours of Musharraf's departure are greatly exaggerated. This man is at his best when he is in a corner, this soldier may have been politically wounded but it is when he is seemingly down when he can be quite lethal. Musharraf is not going anywhere, at least not yet! Neither is Shaukat Aziz." This observation stands true six months later.

To quote my article of June 18, 2007, in an article "master of the game," "The president should head the armed forces and the national intelligence board (with all intelligence agencies reporting to the board), this will prevent intelligence agencies being used for political purposes.

The Office of the president

should not be a political one; this is easier said than done given that he (or she) must be elected by exercise of adult franchise. The Chief Justice should administer a financially independent judiciary and the national accountability board (Nab on the Pakistani pattern but under the superior judiciary) under his authority with powers to target the functionaries of the judiciary and the Armed Forces."

While the usual classic mistakes of governance in an enduring search for survivability scar his otherwise benign rule, Musharraf's successes still far outmatch his failures.

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Ikrum Sehgal is an eminent Pakistani political analyst and columnist.