

B Chowdhury's national government idea

Consensus on policies and principles are a greater need

THE suggestions from former president AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury regarding a government of national consensus for a decade have predictably generated widespread comment. Professor Chowdhury would like the nation to know that such a government can take shape after the general elections promised for end-2008. While one is already to welcome new political ideas, especially in such fraught conditions as those in Bangladesh, one notes that the suggestion the former head of state has put forward lacks the details that might have lent it a little more substance. We, at this newspaper, have been following carefully the debate arising out of Chowdhury's formula. We believe however, the idea of a government of national consensus runs contrary to the letter and spirit of the constitution.

Briefly, at a time when we need answers to some old questions, Professor Chowdhury's suggestions throw up some new, disquieting questions altogether. He has not explained under what constitutional or legal basis a government of consensus will function for ten years. Moreover, the plan clearly appears to abjure the idea of a parliamentary opposition which, in a modern democracy, is a guarantee of checks and balances. A government that operates without any opposition is a situation common in conditions of dictatorship. In a democracy, all government and no opposition offers a clear recipe for political disaster. It is such realities that make us worry about Chowdhury's prescription for governance. A more well thought out articulation of his suggestions is now needed. As it is, the suggestions, which were obviously not fleshed out before they were revealed to the country, appear too cursory to merit considered or philosophical debate. We therefore have no option but to dismiss them.

All said and done, though, a consensus on certain essential aspects of politics, if not a government of national consensus, needs to be in place if democracy is to succeed in future. Our political parties must agree to turn their backs on the debilitating politics that has scarred our society in the last sixteen years and harmed the economy to a great extent resolving instead to turn a new leaf in the overall interest of the nation. Both the ruling and opposition parties in Parliament must pledge to carry out their responsibilities and so ensure that a stable, productive Jatiya Sangsad is in place. The endless and mindless boycott of the JS that has been a bad practice since 1991 must be eschewed and all discussion and debate must be conducted within the House. The role of the Speaker, which has largely been controversial must be one that transcends partisanship. For the ruling party, the job is cut out: it must take the lead in ensuring that the opposition is treated with the respect and deference so essential to the functioning of democracy. For the opposition, the clear choice will be one of keeping the government on its toes through informed debate and at the same time prepare to be a government of the future.

A tribute to Obaidul Huq

He was the last of a vanishing breed

OBaidul Huq who traversed close to six decades of journalism in these parts, leaving his indelible imprint on it, is no more. He had been associated with Bangladesh Observer since its founding days as Pakistan Observer under the able leadership of eminent editor late Abdus Salam. He went on to become the editor of the influential daily in 1972.

He was a professional with a difference. He was a scholarly journalist of rare calibre and integrity. He was revered and respected both by his peers and juniors alike. As much as a stickler he was for quality and high professionalism he was also full of humour and guided his juniors in an environment of amiability and friendliness. He had a very exalted sense of journalistic perfection and wouldn't even put up with printing mistakes, far less factual or conceptual errors.

Obaidul Huq was indeed a man of multifaceted talent. Once he even tried his hand in film making but he would be mostly remembered for his witty, saucy and insightful columns.

He lived to be 96 years of age and right through the last days of his life he remained agile and had something to offer, not just to the profession of journalism but the society at large which was gripped by moral degeneracy.

With the departure of Obaidul Huq the nation has lost not just a journalist but also a man of substance, knowledge and integrity that is rare to find these days. The vacuum created by his departure would be hard to fill in.

Let his spirit live amongst us forever. This paper joins the entire nation in paying a glorious tribute to Obaidul Huq. May his soul rest in peace.



FAREED ZAKARIA
writes from Washington

THE Burmese government's grotesque crackdown on pro-democracy protests will have one certain effect. The United States and the European Union will place more sanctions on the country. Its economy will suffer, its isolation will deepen. And what will this achieve? Sanctions are the Energizer Bunny of foreign policy. Despite a dismal record, they just keep on ticking. With countries like Burma, sanctions have become a substitute for an actual policy.

Sanctions do hurt. The Burmese junta's reference to them last week makes clear that they feel the pain. And the fact that 15 years ago Aung San Suu Kyi supported them makes me pause. I admire her moral courage tremendously. But that does not mean that every specific policy prescription of hers is right. I can think of other moral giants—Gandhi, Martin Luther King—who could also, sometimes, be wrong on policy. Iran's leading dissident Akbar Ganji does not support broad sanctions against his country.

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By design, sanctions shrink a country's economy. But the parts of the economy they shrink most are those that aren't under total state control. The result, says Robert Pape, a University of Chicago professor who has authored a wide-ranging study on the topic, is that "the state gains greater control of a smaller pie. And it shifts resources in the country toward groups that support (the state) and away from those that oppose it." In other words, the government gets stronger. We can see this at work from Cuba to Iran. "Even in Iraq,"

says Pape, "there were far fewer coup attempts in the era of sanctions than in the previous decades." In Burma, one effect of Western sanctions was to shut down the country's textile exports during the late 1990s, forcing hundreds of thousands of people out of jobs. There is evidence that many of the women ended up in the sex trade, enough evidence that in 2003 the then State Department spokesman Richard Boucher acknowledged it but expressed the hope that over time sanctions would change Burma. In addition,

as legitimate businesses dry up, black markets spring up, and the thugs and gangs who can handle these new rules flourish. Burmese gems are now traded actively in this manner. Then there are drugs, whose production and supply multiply. In all of this, the military, which controls border crossings, ports and checkpoints, always prospers.

One of the lessons of Iraq surely is that a prolonged sanctions regime will destroy civil society and empower the worst elements of the country, those who thrive in such a gangland atmosphere. If the purpose of sanctions is to bring about a better system for that country, devastating its society is a strange path to the new order. Burma is a particularly complicated place for such an experiment because it is riven with ethnic divisions and conflict. The Burmese government has been fighting 17 ethnic rebel groups for more than 50 years. Many of the rebels now

control territory and run their own drug and resource cartels. The country is a failed state waiting to happen. Its one functioning national institution is the Army. Bringing liberal democracy to the country is going to be a challenge anyhow, and it is being made more difficult by the evisceration of its society.

In the early 1990s, after refusing to accept the results of an election in which Suu Kyi won, the Burmese regime began—haltingly—to open up the economy. But Western sanctions quickly put an end to such moves. Thant Myint-U, a former senior U.N. official and author of "The River of Lost Footsteps," a wonderful and affectionate portrait of Burma, argues that had that process of trade, travel and investment been encouraged, "Burma today would look more like Vietnam. It would have many more connections with the world, much more economic and social activity, and the regime would be

far more constrained and reluctant to use force or engage in crackdowns."

The other effect of sanctions has been that American firms have mostly been replaced by Chinese companies. (This is precisely what's happened on a larger scale in Sudan, where American firms discovered and built the country's oilfields, then had to abandon them because of the worsening human-rights situation, and now find that the fields have been picked up by Chinese state oil companies.) And while it is perfectly fair to blame Beijing for supporting a dictatorial regime, the Indians, the Thais, the Malaysians and others have also been happy to step into the vacuum in Burma. Is this a net gain for America, for Burma and for human rights?

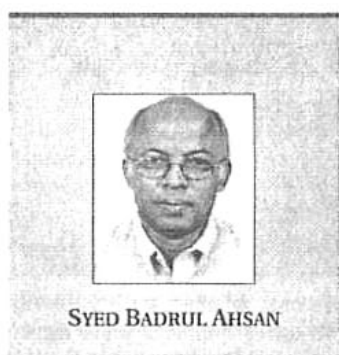
Thant, who has a celebrated pedigree in Burma—he is the only grandson of U Thant, the third secretary-general of the United Nations, hopes for sustained

diplomatic pressure to get the regime to begin a process of real reform, involving the United States, China and India. "If the three countries can reach some consensus, that's the only outside pressure that is likely to matter," he says. "America can still play a crucial role. What the Burmese really want if they had a choice is not to be another province of China. They aspire to be a proud, independent country. There are many people there, even in the regime, who want to have good relations with America and the West. But my fear is that the West, momentarily aroused, will reflexively impose new sanctions and then move on. The result will be that the West's role in Burma will decline even more, China's will rise, and Burma will be further away from a liberal democratic future."

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Big (red) Hat is former DG of BISIS.

A consensus government -- and no opposition?



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

IN a season brimming over with some novel ideas about governance and statecraft, Professor AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury's suggestion that, once the elections of 2008 are gone through, a government of national consensus might be put in place (for a decade) only adds to the excitement. You only have to recapitulate everything that has happened in these past few months to get a sense of where the country is going, or trying to go.

When the Iajuddin caretaker administration was peremptorily shown the door, to our intense relief, through an imposition of a state of emergency, it was the natural popular expectation that free, fair and transparent elections would be organised, and the country would soon go back into the hands of decent, caring politicians after the kleptocracy that passed for government between October 2001 and October 2006. Well, that did not happen, as we know only too well by now.

What did happen, though, was a drive against corruption, an undertaking that the nation had little reason to argue with, by and large. And then began to happen all those exciting, disquieting things which have at regular intervals raised some rather hefty questions about the state of national politics in the days to be. Suddenly, everyone

GROUND REALITIES
Dr. Chowdhury's arguments, given the clear democratic goals the country has set for itself, fall flat. He has not explained what his idea of consensus is. And he does not tell us why a party that might gain a majority of seats in the Jatiyo Sangsad should be asking the minority party to join it in government. As former Jatiyo Sangsad speaker Abdul Hamid puts it in so many words, and for all of us: how much of democracy do you get to have when every legislator is a cog in the wheel of government and parliamentary opposition is conspicuous by its absence?

begin to talk about reforms in the political parties. That was not a bad idea, except for the eerie feeling that somehow it did not emerge from spontaneity.

At this point, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party happens to be waging a huge reform-or-die cum reform-and-die struggle within itself, one that pits the reformists against the conformists in the party. Sad though it may seem for many, the fact remains that the reformist camp led by ousted BNP secretary general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan appears weaker by the day. Khondokar Delwar Hossain is certainly not the man to lead the party into the future, but he and Hannan Shah have clearly convinced their party activists that loyalty to Begum Khaleda Zia is light unto the future.

Ditch the Begum, so they appear to be saying, and you are as good as dead. But that by no means is a suggestion that the BNP has been getting its act together. Much more water will have to flow under the bridge before any single group gains the upper hand and finally is able to take charge of that shattered down headquarters of the party in downtown Dhaka.

Now observe the Awami League. The activities, or the lack of them, of the reformists in the party in these past few weeks say a whole lot about conditions

within its corridors. Suranjit Sengupta has come back home after quite a few months of sojourn abroad. Amir Hossain Amu keeps moving to and fro, between Dhaka and Singapore. Tofail Ahmed, having initially promoted the reformist cause in the party, has wisely fallen silent. And the inclusion of his name on the newest list of corruption suspects has somehow dampened the reform ardour in him. Overall, therefore, all talk of reforms in the Awami League is something no one in the party wishes to think back on, especially not with Sheikh Hasina spending time in imprisonment.

The contrast between the BNP and the AL could not have been clearer. The former might, in the end, be compelled to ditch Begum Zia, with or without reforms. In the latter, there is hardly any sign that the broad spectrum of the party grassroots is even remotely considering a future without the daughter of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as its leader. The Hasina loyalists in the Awami League have just made it known once more that reforms are not on the agenda, at least not yet. Mukul Bose, acting party general secretary over the past few months, has made way for the eminently decent and widely acceptable Syed Ashrafur Islam.

Excitement, if you have cared

to notice, does not begin and end with the political parties. You spot it in other realms as well. The Election Commission, reconstituted since the early days of this interim administration, has persistently and exasperatingly offered hope to the country about a final preparation of a voters' list. Months have gone by and yet no enumerators have gone visiting citizens to enlist their names as voters. Chief Election Commissioner ATM Shamsul Huda, having all these months endlessly reassured us about general elections being held by December 2008, now informs us with a bit of alacrity that the voting could happen by October of next year, two months before the original date.

You almost get into a state of frenzied happiness, until you spot that footnote in the CEC's statement: elections in October are possible if a voters' list is ready by July of next year. It all boils down to a question of ifs and buts. So what you for a while thought could be your October surprise may not be there after all. Or you could reflect on things somewhat philosophically. There have been so many surprises in these past months that you might actually end up being indifferent to any new ones. It is all a matter of choice.

And yet there is that small bit you need to do to put things in perspective. After what was a clear non-starter for Muhammad Yunus in national politics, along came Ferdous Qureshi with his new party that is not yet a new party. Not much has happened to convince the country that Qureshi and his friends can supplant the Awami League or even the BNP in the near future. That is not surprising. Men who try hammering political parties into shape in conditions that leave eyebrows raised everywhere in the end find that they do not get anywhere. That may be a good thing for a nation today worried about some clear moves being made to give politics a bad name owing to the depredations of the government Khaleda Zia led until a year ago.

Which takes us back to Badruddoza Chowdhury's plans for a government of national consensus post-2008. Of course, he has advised critics of his plan to read through his suggestions before pouncing on him. Well, the truth is that those critics have indeed pored over his suggestions and found nothing in them that comes close to offering a mechanism for a strengthening of democratic order in Bangladesh. The constitution has no provision for such an administration. Yes, certainly we can opt for a national government when extraordinary circumstances -- and among these are the country's being in a state of war, or general elections producing a stalemate at the voting -- are upon us.

Barring such exigencies, why must political parties agree that whatever the results of the elections they can come together to form a national government? Britain had such a government in the war years, understand-

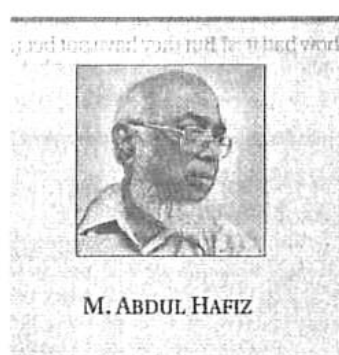
ably. In 1946, the Indian National Congress and the All-India Muslim League cobbled such a government into shape, with not very happy results. And remember that in January 1971, more than a month after the Awami League secured a majority of seats in the Pakistan national assembly through general elections, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto tried persuading Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman into forming a grand Awami League-People's Party coalition in Islamabad. Mujib gave, for very cogent reasons, short shrift to Bhutto's sophistry.

Dr Chowdhury's arguments, given the clear democratic goals the country has set for itself, fall flat. He has not explained what his idea of consensus is. And he does not tell us why a party that might gain a majority of seats in the Jatiyo Sangsad should be asking the minority party to join it in government. As former Jatiyo Sangsad speaker Abdul Hamid puts it in so many words, and for all of us: how much of democracy do you get to have when every legislator is a cog in the wheel of government and parliamentary opposition is conspicuous by its absence?

These are opaque times we live through, an uncertain landscape we inhabit. But that is little reason for us to suppose that time-honoured democratic political traditions can be set aside only because some among us may have brought crudity into governance and some others might be dreaming of their own day in the sun under a new order. Bikalpa Dhara may turn into the Liberal Democratic Party and then go back to being Bikalpa Dhara. Politics, on the other hand, is an entirely different proposition.

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The rumpus over Indo-US nuclear deal



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

ACCORDING to US under-secretary of state, Nicholas Burns, the United States and India reached an agreement on July 27 on the terms and conditions of a civil nuclear cooperation accord known as 123 Agreement. The Americans have called it "the symbolic centerpiece of a global partnership between our two countries." The negotiating skill and tenacity of the Indian officials earned India everything it wanted, and more. The US counterparts wrapped it up with the convoluted language to give the appearance of an agreement perfectly in line with the letter and spirit of current American law.

The Americans have promised under the agreement to help India build a strategic fuel reserve

PERSPECTIVES
The Indian government seems to be implementing the U-turn despite strong opposition from many popular and political quarters, including many of its own allies in the ruling United Popular Alliance (UPA). But the ruling elite in determined through this major change of course in India's principled foreign policy, hoping to latch on the sole superpower. The current deal is denounced even in India by several quarters as a sellout, and as acceptance of Uncle Sam's supremacy.

so that India's nuclear activity could continue, even if there was disruption in supply.

American law requires that all nuclear cooperation must cease with any country that carries out a nuclear explosion. This law will be applicable even if it is not specifically mentioned in the agreement. But the Americans gave an undertaking of working with India to find it an alternate fuel, under American law, they are at all required to stop fuel supply themselves and ask for the return of fuel and technology supplied earlier.

The agreement states that "consistent with the July 18, 2005 joint statement, the United States has reaffirmed its assurance to create the necessary condition for India to have assured and full access to fuel. As part of its implementation of the July 10, 2005

joint statement, the United States is committed to seeking agreements from the US congress to amend its domestic laws, and to work with friends and allies to adjust the practices of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) to create the necessary conditions for India to obtain full access to the international fuel market."

After reading between the lines of the text, it appears that even American law may not apply to Indo-US nuclear agreements.

As regards the termination of agreements -- the party seeking it must give reasons for such action and be prepared to hold consultation on the subject. It is an indication that there may not be an immediate cessation, and American law may well be amended to delay or stop the

cessation even if India resorts to nuclear testing -- say, in response to resumption of such tests by Pakistan or China. The Indians have been circumspect enough to guard against the possibility and insisted on having American help in negotiating an India-specific agreement with the IAEA, which would allow them to withdraw the civilian reactors from safeguard if there is an interruption in fuel supply, rather than retaining the "perpetuity" safeguard provision.

The Indians are already building a reprocessing facility, and want to place it under IAEA safeguards. The Americans seem prepared to amend the 123 Agreement in future to provide the equipment and technology for the state-of-art reprocessing facility in India. For the Indians,

the Indo-US deal is a sweetheart accord, while it largely reflects also the Bush administration's desperate need to chalk up at least one foreign policy success in its record of disastrous failures.

Also inherent in it is a strategic vision. This will help cement the alliance that the US is seeking to build in "containing China." A part of the mission of the controversial naval exercise participated by NSG countries in Bay of Bengal last month aimed at unstated encirclement of China. For all the concessions given to the Indians, there is latent US expectation to have India on her side in also isolating a recalcitrant Iran.

Most of the Indian establishment is solidly behind the agreement, which requires ratification only by the cabinet and not the Parliament. This process has been completed, even though a grim atmosphere appears to prevail in New Delhi and a raucous debate can be expected over it. But the question that is gaining primacy now is whether the Indian people, represented by the Lok Sabha, will accept it. Although, in the Indian system, the parliament is not required to endorse such agreements, questions do arise as to whether the

parliament, representing billion-plus Indians, can be by-passed in taking the momentous decision redrawing the contour of the country's geo-political profile, reversing the basic premise of the nation's world view, and marking a tectonic shift in India's foreign policy. After this deal, India is no longer a non-aligned power. It will no longer be the champion of a multi-polar world. New India wants to emerge as a global power and enjoy the fruits that go with that status. It is no longer concerned with ethics and morality in matters of policy.

The Indian government seems to be implementing the U-turn despite strong opposition from many popular and political quarters, including many of its own allies in the ruling United Popular Alliance (UPA). But the ruling elite in determined through this major change of course in India's principled foreign policy, hoping to latch on the sole superpower. The current deal is denounced even in India by several quarters as a sellout, and as acceptance of Uncle Sam's supremacy. It also remains to be seen if Bush's waning presidency will be able to muster enough political support to sell this deal to the US Congress.

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Sleepwalking to sanction, again