

CA's speech clears the air

All efforts must now be geared to election

ON the back of year-end change in the composition of the advisory council and a cabinet meeting deciding to initiate dialogue with political parties, Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed, into the second year of his government, has elaborated a series of steps getting underway to set the nation firmly on course to general election.

He has made it emphatically clear that national election shall be held by December 2008, if not earlier. To that end, his government is seriously thinking of allowing indoor politics all over the country and gradually relaxing the state of emergency to create a congenial atmosphere for interaction within political parties. In conjunction with these steps, the government will initiate a dialogue with political parties. There have been consultations between the EC and political party representatives on electoral reform. Now, the dialogue prospects between the government and the political parties should be fully utilised for confidence building between both sides and addressing the issues of ensuring elections that are free from violence, terrorism and influence of black money.

The removal of fetters on political activities should accelerate the process of intra-party reforms for which an unwritten consensus is in existence among political parties themselves, let alone among the general people. The dialogue between the government and political parties is a practical necessity that could not be given a short shrift. The qualitative aspect of the forthcoming elections has acquired great significance in view of the rising public expectation to see the general election produce a government and an opposition comprising clean, honest and competent persons.

The reactions of the political parties to the CA's address have been positive. That gives us hope that political leaders would cooperate with the government and the EC in their efforts to hold free, fair and credible elections by December 2008. We cannot lose sight of the facts that an election not participated by all parties cannot be credible and that there is a lot of ground to be covered for the election to be held on schedule. We are just getting into the substantive part -- the job is cut out for all concerned.

Question paper leakage

Crush the network of criminals

ONLY the other day we had expressed our dismay at question paper leakage in Dhaka University in this column. We had urged the government to take strong measures to prevent recurrence of such incident so that honest students did not suffer in the process. But before we heard of any worthy measures taken by the authorities towards apprehending the network of criminals, the story of leakage of 2nd year Honours English Compulsory Examination 2006 question paper in the National University (NU) came as a shocker. The leakage fiasco forced students of a number of NU affiliated institutions like Dhaka College and Eden College come out protesting on streets, which subsequently led to the suspension of the examination. We believe NU has formed a three-member investigation committee to get to the bottom of it and submit a report in seven days. It only remains to be seen whether this committee will deliver the goods or meet the same fate like that of the numerous ones in the past thrown into the cold chamber.

Leakage of question papers at the higher academic levels has turned into a malady in the recent years. In last five years we have been appalled a number of times by the recurrence of question paper leakage hours before the examinations, but, despite detailed reports in the media, very little has been done to prevent such incidence. Only recently students of the department of Political Science of Dhaka University alleged selling of question papers on the campus. Such shameful acts only discredit our education system and the glorious tradition attached to it. The bulk of the honest students suffer immensely when question papers find their way out and fall into the hands of the criminals and their cohorts. What is most painful is the allegation that a section of teachers are involved in the heinous act but remain the least suspected by the law enforcing authorities. We find this totally unacceptable and urge the government to form independent investigation body to identify such teachers and bring them to justice.

As said before, we have a well-acclaimed history of producing scholars of world standard, who are not only winning international accolades but also contributing to every department of the growth of human civilisation, including rocket science. We therefore are not ready to hear any more of proliferation of criminality in the educational institutes. Enough is enough. The authorities must come down heavily on the organised gangs operating from within to destroy the education sector.

The myth of an American Century!



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

EVER if obfuscated by gory development in our neighbourhood -- the assassination of Pakistan's charismatic leader, Benazir Bhutto and its widespread repercussions -- two events of global significance couldn't stand out as the year 2007 eclipsed in the sea of eternity. The first one was Time Magazine giving Vladimir Putin, the steely-eyed Russian leader, the accolade of Person of the Year. The second was the purchase by the China Investment Corporation of nearly 10 percent of the American bank, Morgan Stanley, as it announced the write-off of \$9.4bn bad debts. Here is an attempt to put the events in some historical perspective.

In 1990 this scribe happened to meet Francis Fukuyama, the Japanese-born American academic who was then enjoying a halo of distinction at a seminar in Wilton Park near London with his widely publicised treatise, titled *The end of history*, produced in the wake of the

PERSPECTIVES

Within less than a decade or so of the founding of a slightly risible organisation, "The project for new American Century," Time magazine honoured Putin, considering his country "critical for the 21st century." In the meantime, the dollar has collapsed to hover at 50 pence sterling, and America's war in Iraq now well exceeds its involvement in the second world war and has already cost \$ 600 bn -- a sum which Nobel prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz believes will reach \$1 tn. This is a credit-card war, for which the Americans will be paying Chinese banks for years after George Bush has left the office.

Cold War's demise. He was found explaining to any one willing to listen that the world had reached a point where there was no longer any meaningful dispute between Marxism and market. He particularly emphasised that Western liberal democracy was becoming the ultimate form of human government.

The hiatus of only a decade or so has proved that Fukuyama's findings were alluring but illusory. Although there was a positive response to the dictum of The end of history, as it sparked an animated debate in those days, the enthusiasm faded with the passage of time. Now, the state of affairs at the end of 2007, in which Russia and China appear to be doing rather well without adopting Western liberal democracy in its classic form and even by challenging the model with disdain, is certainly a damper for the "end of history" crusaders.

Contrary to expectation, Russia, ravaged by Yeltsin's "mafia" democracy, has turned its back to the creed. In a recent opinion poll, only 20 percent of Russians favoured democracy and market economy. As for China, her proverbial pragmatism does not encompass democracy as yet, but she is well aware of the importance of economic muscle in international power relations.

However, for a vast number of the world's people democracy is an aspiration -- but only after basic security and at least a semblance of prosperity. Both in Russia and China all efforts at the moment are directed towards that, and that their efforts have started to bear fruits is evident from the fact the two great powers of the communist era have ended the year more confident than they were at any time since they lost the Cold War. And what is interesting is that then sense of purpose and

defiance led to doubts in the West as to the efficacy of the system being pushed there.

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Even though, the current war costs about 1 percent of America's annual \$13,247 bn GDP, it is difficult to ignore a perfectly plotted story in this, America, the only superpower

at the moment, is, ironically, financed by its chief competition in a prolonged exercise of distraction. It absorbs a huge amount of money and much of the US' policy-making and diplomatic energies. At the same time, the very nature of that distraction dissipates American influence over the world.

While the US frets about surges, troops withdrawal and inconsequential democratisation in occupied countries, the project for the new Chinese century has been well underway for sometime, and it is striking how intelligently the Chinese, being the world's fourth largest economic power, have been extending their influence while rarely indulging in high profile diplomacy or unnecessary power projection.

Yet, her power trajectory has been steeply rising, with 17 percent increase in its defence budget, test firing of something called a direct ascent anti-satellite missile that could atomise one of its own weather satellites, launching of massive computer hacking operations against western governments and businesses, and so on. The resource rich countries in Africa and Latin America, dreading by western powers for their endemic instabilities, have been conveniently won over by the Chinese.

That is not true of Russia which, over the last year, has opted to challenge the West at practically every turn, whether by planting a flag on the seabed beneath the Arctic ice

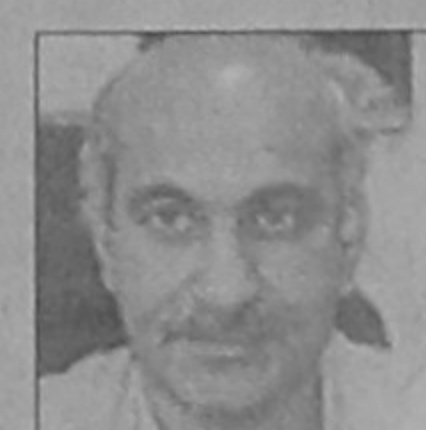
cap, testing the massive ordnance air blast bomb, or disputing the siting of an early warning defence system in Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, Russia's GDP is three times what it was in 2002. The oil prices account for most of the rise, but there is a growing middle class with more money to spend, and a sense of renewed national pride. Even if modest, there is an improvement in the standard of living. The "mafia" democracy of the Yeltsin era been replaced by what is called "sovereign democracy" in the phraseology used by the Kremlin.

So much for Fukuyama's "final form of human government." Putin openly disputes the virtue, if any, of western democracy. The value system the Americans once prided on has since been eroded by Guantanamo, the Patriot Act, and general attack on constitutional rights in America. A recent poll published in the International Herald Tribune showed that a majority of Americans believe that their country is a threat to world peace, and a similar proportion say that America is weaker today than it was at the start of the Bush administration.

The rise and resurgence of Chinese and Russian power, and a relative weakening of the world's sole superpower, aptly represents the civilisational tradition of the rise of one influence and the decline of another.

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Knockout time



M.J. AKBAR

THE logic of the last round can be significantly different from the strategies that have sustained a heavyweight bout thus far. When the contestants hear the final bell, they can be sure of two things in a democracy tournament: there will be a winner or a loser, because there is nothing called an inconclusive draw. Two, time is finite.

This is a moment for decisions; the options of weave-and-duck are over. You need to conserve your maximum strength for the knockout punch in this winner-takes-all struggle.

Gujarat seems to have opened both the pores and the eyes of the Congress. From the pores has oozed some panic-perspiration. It remains to be seen whether open eyes will bring clarity. Mrs. Sonia Gandhi has authorised some mobilisation of fresh recruitment to the ranks, and the person at the top of the wooing-list is Mulayam Singh Yadav, after three years during which Yadav was the target of some fairly ferocious pummeling.

This is ironic, of course, since Yadav was humiliated, and then kept out of government, after he

offered and gave full support to the coalition now in office in Delhi. A little more civility three and a half years ago, and the deal might have been in place all the while. Of course, if politics brings such bedfellows together, the Congress will suddenly convert Amar Singh from brush-lip to gentleman, and issue a character certificate to Amitabh Bachchan that he made no efforts to evade income tax and all along had been a bosom family friend.

This is politics, or at least personal politics, a bane of Indian democracy. The glue for a potential alliance is a common enemy, the forthright Ms. Mayawati. The Congress should have realised many years ago that Mayawati and the Congress are incompatible because their vote-structure overlaps. If Mayawati succeeds, the Congress is sunk. She damaged the Congress in a dozen constituencies in Himachal Pradesh, and perhaps as many in Gujarat.

What can prevent a Congress-Mulayam alliance now? The same thing that sabotaged it to begin with: personal angst. Samajwadi Party leaders now have long lists of grievances, and unless they are remedied the acrimony will not suddenly disappear. The Congress will need more than one remedy in

the North in the general elections that seem destined for this year.

The Left is still in a daze in Bengal, stunned by the virulent public anger over Nandigram and Singur. This is not an urban phenomenon, but has spread to the villages. The coming panchayat elections this summer will be as tough as any that the CPI(M) has fought.

Moreover, the Muslims, who have been the strongest supporters of the Left, are slipping from its grasp. Justice Rajinder Sachar's report has exposed the neglect of the community in Bengal; he is identified now not only with discrimination but also with justice.

There is a double trap here. Even as the BJP plans to call Sachar appeasement, Muslims are distancing themselves from their preferred parties out of disillusionment. The vacuum is being filled by the religious leaders, who have now created political platforms. The Left, averse to identity politics because of its conviction that class was the principal determinant, has become marooned.

To its credit, it has got the message and is addressing the problem, not just by windbag rhetoric, the traditional medication offered by politicians, but with a series of grass-roots' programs that have

been sanctioned, and aim at basics like education and employment (including in the government sector). This may be insufficient to salve wounds before a general election, but it will be recognised before the next Assembly elections.

The problem of Taslima Nasreen's controversial book, and her immense desire to live among friends in Kolkata, has the potential to resurrect passions at any moment. If this book goes on sale at the Kolkata book fair in the last week of January this year, there could be trouble. The venue is the Park Circus Maidan, close to the Muslim localities of the city.

Can the Left do anything to recover before the Lok Sabha elections? It has one hidden asset, a bit of a negative one, but substantial nevertheless. We know what the Left Front is all about: the cumbrous economic transition process, which has turned into a lurch rather than a trot; a stagnant administrative delivery mechanism that aborts the best of intentions; the weariness of incumbency. We know the size of each wart, and it is not a pretty sight.

But what precisely is the alternative, Mamata Banerjee, all about? We know she wants to be chief minister and throw the Tata car project into the Bay of Bengal. But

how does she plan to provide jobs to Bengal's young?

We know she is censorious about the Marxist neglect of Muslims, but how precisely is she planning to deliver salvation? We have a lot of silence instead of coherent answers. The Left can exploit contradictions inherent in the personality-and-martyrdom politics of Mamata Banerjee: it has the skill and the will to do so. There was a time when 'if' would have been redundant. These days a qualification is necessary.

What can Dr. Manmohan Singh do in the last months of his prime ministership? For starters, there is something he should not do. He must avoid the temptation to turn the last budget of his administration, due in February, into a charity jumble sale. Throwing money at vote banks simply does not work. It infuriates those who have been denied, and bores the beneficiaries, who wanted such inducements in the first budget, when there was time for implementation, and not in the last, when there is time only to ask for votes.

Everyone knows Dr. Singh is a mild Prime Minister. That is admirable. Very few men are capable of modesty in high office. Power generally travels at lightning speed to their head, propelling them upwards like a gas balloon without a tail. Dr. Singh remains simple and honest -- even as all around him ego-wrecked ministers stack it up in sackfuls.

But the question Dr. Singh must answer is this: has he been a weak Prime Minister? He has only one way left to kill such an allegation, and he has perhaps up to February and possibly March to do so.

The central thrust of his years in office has been the Indo-US nuclear deal, now wandering in the limbo of uncertainty and headed towards the purgatory of lost souls if left without a tether. The Americans are irritated at what they see as betrayal, or at least bad judgment. Indian supporters of the deal are aghast. If Dr. Singh lets down the passion that he himself generated, he will not be given time for penitence.

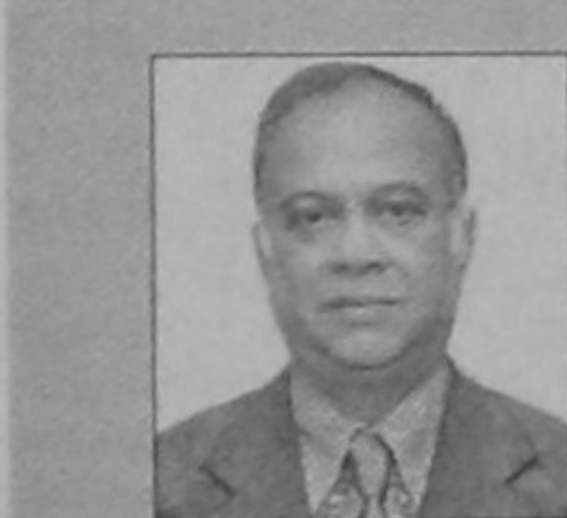
As readers of this column are aware, I have opposed the deal because of many of the provisions of the Hyde Act, which I consider intrusive, abrasive and even impudent. (Why should Iran be mentioned 18 times in a bilateral deal between the United States and India?) But the Prime Minister believes very deeply that India can live with such conditions, and the trade-off is worth the benefits that will accrue to the country.

He has always argued that the deal is in the national interest, in which case it is axiomatic that the national interest should prevail over the government's interest, which is really nothing more than surviving a few extra months. It is not as if Dr. Singh was being asked to sacrifice three years of his term.

If Dr. Singh stakes his government even now on the deal, you might be able to call him mistaken, but you will not be able to call him weak. Without strength, he and the Congress might as well not even begin sparring for the last round -- otherwise instead of a knockout we will witness a knockabout.

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New date for elections augurs well for Nepal



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

MATTERS AROUND US

The postponement of the crucial polls raised eye-brows about the shape of things in Nepal, but wisdom dawned on both parties as they narrowed down differences. The ultras rejoined the government, and both have now agreed on fresh dates for the elections.

November 2007, but was called off indefinitely following serious differences between the government and the Maoists, mainly on the issue of the fate of the monarchy in Nepal. Later, wrangling largely disappeared as the parliament passed a proposal asking the government to initiate legal preparations to declare the country a Republic, a key demand of the radicals. The decision by the parliament came as a great relief for the Himalayan nation that was witnessing disconcerting developments stemming from rifts between two main players of country's political spectrum. This obviated to a large extent the situation that had threatened a government Maoist rupture, which would have adversely influenced the political situation.

Earlier, the Maoists, who worked closely with the seven-party political alliance in the anti-king agitation in 2006, had called for a referendum in Nepal to determine the fate

of the monarchy. The demand came close on the heels of the scrapping of the national elections when the ultras refused to take part in charging the government with failure to abolish monarchy in the country. The seven-party government was keen to go ahead with the November 22 polls, but the postponement forced by the radicals complicated the political situation, raising uncertainty about the future. The worsening government Maoist ties had not only cast a dark shadow on the political horizon but also seemed to scuttle the prospects of the declared roadmap. Fortunately, things changed for the better subsequently.

Nepal, late last year, again showed signs of trouble as the government and the Maoists seemed to be falling apart. This difference could have led to a situation where the roadmap for a "New Nepal" might have become increasingly uncertain. While the country looked

well set for political stability following last year's successful anti-king agitation, the following situation hardly carried anything encouraging. Happily for both the sides, the deterioration of relations was arrested in time.

A remarkable people's victory was accomplished in Nepal in 2006, after a long-drawn agitation demanding restoration of representative authority and curbing of corruption and misuse of powers by the monarchy. King Gyanendra capitulated, and finally agreed to reconvene the elected parliament, which he had dissolved in 2002 with utter disregard for democratic norms.

Kathmandu admirably introduced Westminster type democracy in 1990, ending the more than two centuries old effective monarchy, but was later robbed off this system. However, a section of the politicians was also to blame for the situation, as they failed to live up to peoples

expectations because of their unbridled corruption and abuse of power. The King exploited this situation to grab absolute authority for the throne once again, but his repressive rule and lust for power and wealth once again turned the masses against him and, consequently, Nepal reverted to representative rule.

However, the government headed by Prime Minister G.P. Koirala faced two main problems when elected government was restored. First, the monarchy issue, as the government was vacillating on its fate. The seven-party alliance carried out the anti-king movement in collusion with the Maoists, who are totally opposed to the existence of monarchy in any form and want to turn the country a People's Republic. The political parties are largely at variance with the radicals on this issue as all political parties do not see eye to eye on the matter. The monarchy debate poses a big challenge, since some quarters feel that the country could continue with the "twin pillars" of constitutional monarchy and elected government, in line with Britain or Japan. Many others strongly feel that the monarchy concept must be scrapped altogether.

The second main challenge for the new government is the sensitive

issue of dealing with the Maoists, who were partners of the seven-party alliance in the anti-king agitation. The two sides agreed to cooperate on fundamental issues like national elections and a new constitution for the country, despite having some differences on certain matters. They signed a landmark peace agreement and the Maoists, who have a large force of cadres and plenty of weapons that were mobilised over the years, also agreed to come into mainstream politics. Later, they joined the seven-party alliance government -- all this came as a big relief for the Nepalese, who had experienced massive political mayhem prior to this healthy situation.

As the Nepalese pin high hopes on the government and the Maoists, they also have bitter memories. The brief spell of democratic rule after 1990 was unfortunately marked by political infighting, rampant corruption and revolving governments, that had largely eroded peoples' faith in the quality of leadership. But people became bitter because of the king's arbitrary style of functioning and amassing of wealth in the poverty-ridden nation. Political parties and the Maoists worked together towards political and economic stability. The two sides maintained broad understanding and agreed for

elections in November for a constituent parliament to draft a new constitution.

Unfortunately, differences began to crop up as the radicals later quit the government, accusing it of not doing enough against the monarchy. True, the government has, so far, taken several decisions, including curbing the political and financial powers of the king, and is mulling with the idea of nationalising the palaces belonging to the royal family. But the Maoists consider these measures as inadequate, and are opposing tooth and nail the existence of monarchy in any form.

Radicals opposed the elections, saying polls would be meaningless unless monarchy was abolished. The government has reduced the once-powerful king to a lame-duck, but is not very keen to abolish the system all together. The postponement of the crucial polls raised eyebrows about the shape of things in Nepal, but wisdom dawned on both parties as they narrowed down differences. The ultras rejoined the government, and both have now agreed on fresh dates for the elections.

True, the Maoists are not fully happy with the decision of the parliament, as they want abolition of the monarchy altogether while the parliament has stopped short of

that decision. The proposal instructed the government for taking measures to turn the country into a Republic, and this definitely met a part of the demand of the ultras, who now seem to be calling the shots. However, King Gyanendra will remain in the throne as the government Maoist deal will be put into effect in the first session of the constituent assembly.

So far, things look positive, but complexities also lie ahead as the government and the ultras may still fall apart on several issues. Prime Minister Koirala has rejected a proposal from radical supreme Pushpa Kumar Daya, popularly known as Prachanda, to induct his former guerrillas in the army. The government decision not to accept the Maoist army in the Nepal army has clearly infuriated the radicals, and this may lead to a souring of the ties that have been retrieved from recent rifts. All parties concerned in Nepal are well advised to avoid issues that are potentially dangerous, because the country is well poised for the desired polls and can ill afford any derailment at this stage. Political and economic stability are imperative for a nation that has suffered badly on both fronts in the near past.

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