

Strengthening local government

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DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH

THE strengthening of local government institutions to address major issues like poverty reduction, good governance, infrastructure development, disaster management etc. is no more a matter of controversy, rather it is a consensus of the whole nation.

For a rural, agro-based national economy and a populace with minimum demand from life, an efficient and dedicated local government can deliver services and generate social and economic awareness to achieve the national goals of Bangladesh.

Keeping in view these priorities and necessities, a grand assembly of local government representatives was arranged on January 5 at Parade Square, Dhaka, to discuss at length the recommendations of the committee constituted for strengthening local government. The Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives deserves appreciation for organising such a gathering

of elected representatives, perhaps the biggest one ever held during this government's tenure.

This has, in fact, created an opportunity for exchanging views and understanding between the central government and the local level representatives to remove confusion, if any.

The chief adviser, chief of the army staff, adviser in charge of local government in their deliberations made it clear that they had every intention of decentralising, and devolving the authority to local governments. They have, however, emphasised the election of honest, dedicated and capable representatives to ensure good governance, and build up a just, equitable and enlightened society.

The salient features of the recommendations of the committee, headed by Health Adviser Dr. A M M Shawkat Ali, were made public and discussed in detail, and the representatives were invited to comment on them. The three-tier local government institutions -- zila parishad, upazila parishad and union parishad -- and the city

corporations and municipalities would be strengthened with the enactment of two Acts as proposed by the committee. A union parishad will have 15 wards in lieu of 9, and women's representation might be raised to 40 percent.

Besides, service rules, need-based manpower, source of revenue, capability building, computerisation at all levels, eligibility of candidates, transparency and accountability of the parishads etc., as suggested by the committee were discussed. The concept of gram sarkar did not find a place in the recommendation, whereas the city government idea formulated by mayors was kept for consideration. The announcement of the enhancement of honorarium of local representatives received applause from almost 8000 representatives present in the assembly.

The most important issue for consideration now is about the timing of the election. An experienced school of thought feels that dedicated, capable and dignified non-partisan representatives would have fair chances of being

elected if local government election is arranged prior to the National Parliament election.

This will eventually help reduce party conflicts, false voting, and demonstration of financial and muscle strength to influence the voters, which negate the concept of free and fair election. Secondly, the genuineness of the voter list can be verified, and corrections made. Thirdly, the importance of the National Assembly election will be reduced if the upazila election is held earlier, and local government representatives are in their positions. Fourthly, this will obviously create confidence about the process of election.

Another group is of the view that the understanding in the process of planning and development could be coherent provided the central and the local governments think along the same wavelength. In the absence of such a situation, the central government might supersede many local bodies to see its own men in power in the resultant vacancy.

The election of 4498 union parishads, 480 upazila parishads, 390 municipalities, and 6 city corporations is not an easy task. It might require few months to complete, and it is not possible to hold the Parliament election at the same time. Therefore, June or July to complete the National Assembly election before the end of 2008 might hold the local government election.

In Bangladesh, elections were held many times before. There

were elections for National Assembly 8 times; on March 7, 1973, February 18, 1979, May 7, 1986, March 3, 1988, February 27, 1991, February 15, 1996, June 12, 1996, October 1, 2001. There were presidential elections 8 times, and referendum 3 times; on May 30, 1977; March 21, 1985 and September 15, 1991.

Besides, there were union parishad elections 7 times, city corporation 5 times, municipal elections 7 times, and upazila elections 2 times. Bangladeshis enjoy election fever, and take so much interest that some candidates consider victory or defeat as the prestige of their family and tradition.

There is no controversy about the strengthening of local government, even among the politicians, though there is difference of opinion about the election of upazila parishad, even within the same political party. Some politicians are of the view that elected upazila chairmen might radically reduce the importance of MPs in the locality. This was the only reason for which, on different occasions, cabinet meetings could not come to a decision about the election of upazila parishad.

Thus, the upazila system has been a non-functional institution since 1991, although the infrastructure and manpower are in situ in the name of upazila. On the other hand, an unconstitutional post of district minister was created to assert the influence of the party in power in the district.



Give us the power to govern ourselves

The timing, and the process of holding election of the local government should be left to the Election Commission, as it is the prerogative of the Commission. The Commission should be given signal after the reform measures taken by the government to go ahead with the election. Local government elections, if organised freely and fairly on a level playing

field before the Parliament election will have obvious reflection in the national level.

The Election Commission must be independent and capable of operating with adequate manpower and resources to act and decide for the restoration of democracy at the grassroots level, and establishment of democratic practices in the country.

In India, the Election Commission brought heterogeneous political parties under the umbrella of strong discipline when TN Sheshan was the chief.

We are waiting for the day when our citizens will feel proud of our election system and see democracy in practice.

Dhiraj Kumar Nath is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Decentralisation can reduce corruption

In my personal estimation, the bottlenecks frequently occurring in the development sector are mostly due to centralisation of the policy options in this particular area of investment in the public sector. Added to this the human factor, with diverse and yet personal aggrandisement for material gains, has been ever intruding in preposterous manner. The ultimate cost-benefit analysis of any infrastructure purportedly erected for the common people of the locality presents a reverse ratio.

KAZI ALAUDDIN AHMED

DOING things at random or in a lackadaisical manner (in the expression of our dear one, late Mezbahuddin Ahmed, popularly known as Bulu Bhai) never accomplishes the desired outcome. Such unplanned action invariably turns out to be colossal wastage of time, money and energy.

Coincidentally, this sort of unproductive investment, particularly in the public sector, creates lot of dissension and despair among the ultimate beneficiaries. More so, when such casually worked out projects aimed at granting infrastructural benefits to the people in the locality eventually become utterly infructuous.

Traditionally, if not in all cases, most of the public utility projects initiated by any government in this part of the subcontinent have been politically motivated. Most of the development projects initiated and implemented either fully or partially during the tenure of a politically elected government have always been party-biased.

Bureaucratic red-tape has been always the main hurdle in the process of implementation. Consequently, there have been ample instances of rescheduling of the period of implementation and corresponding escalation of project cost due to time lag. On top of everything, the awarding of contracts quite often passes

through weird process favouring undeserving ones.

The decision in all such cases is made on flimsy grounds, sometimes rejecting the best offer. All these machinations are made possible at the personal instance of some "mighty" people behind the scene, having direct or indirect access to the power center.

This is just a partial picture of the situation obtaining in the development activities of the public sector since long. The Annual Development Program (ADP) of the government, worked out every year for implementation across the country, has been mostly bereft of national bias. It is quite often parochial in nature, projected to fulfil partisan interests. The implementing ministries, directorates or departments are supposed to monitor the progress of the work, and ensure that there is no compromise in the use of materials, or deviation from the approved plan. In actual practice, however, things do not always go the desired way.

The contractor or the sub-contractor providing construction materials invariably makes "adjustments" that would adequately compensate his investments for getting the work. He is under heavy pressure of the supervising departmental engineer during implementation of the work order. The contractor keeps him in confidence on the use of materials, their quality and proportion so as

to get his tacit and unwritten approval of the compromises made.

And when the time for payment of final bill, certification by the work supervisor and endorsement by the departmental head for payment comes, the accountant and the cashier, concerned clerks, peons etc -- all await receipt of their respective, fixed share of the "profit."

There is no reason to believe that, despite the unjustifiable

"surcharge" at different phases of the actual work, the contractor will sacrifice his share of the net profit so as not to compromise in respect of quality and quantity of the materials. Nor there is any scope for him to strictly adhere to the requirements of the approved plan in any manner in the face of the above mentioned realities pervading this particular area since long. That's why newly built roads and highways have potholes all the way within a short time, roofs of buildings funnel down rainwater even after a brief and light shower, some cave in being deprived of support from the cracked walls. People's lives and properties are the casualties.

As usual, committees appointed for the purpose, reports are submitted but are seldom made known, carry out investiga-

tions. They are consigned to cold storage for an indefinite period, and, in the meantime, those responsible are either transferred to some other places on promotion or are elevated to higher positions at the same place.

This is a very common scenario in almost all other areas where the political party in power initiates development activities. And, traditionally, this is the largest segment where political consideration in respect of benefit dispensation is preponderant. As a result, "sharing of the booty" gets top-most priority, notwithstanding the eligibility of the beneficiaries.

The devastating cyclone Sidr along the coastal belt of the southern districts of Bangladesh and the Sundarbans revealed the total indifference of all the political parties towards the people in the

forested areas. Although such natural calamities have been an ever-recurring phenomenon in those parts of the country, the Disaster Management Department of the government is yet to make any substantial and tangible effort, preemptive as well as preventive, at curtailing the damage to life and property.

In particular, much more needs to be done to improve the state of the cyclone shelters in the stated region. The existing centers are spread out over several miles, and are beyond quick reach of many in emergencies. Consequently, the loss of lives, of people and domestic animals, and of other essential household materials has been many times more than one can imagine. Subsequent to the ruthless lashing of Sidr, accompanied by the ever rising waves of the mighty Bay of Bengal and the rivers nearby, the whole area lay dead and barren, with trees and plants uprooted, households and shanties razed to the ground, and standing crops in the field awaiting harvest damaged beyond salvation. More cyclone shelters near the track of the monster could have saved many people who couldn't reach the existing ones due to their distance.

The survivors have already raised a demand for increasing the number of the shelters, bringing them within easy reach of everyone. Every time angry nature rips through human habitations along the coastal belt and places nearby, it takes heavy toll of human lives, ransacks homesteads, kills or washes away livestock etc. And every time, political leaders and bureaucrats shed "crocodile's tears" in expressing sympathy for the affected. They make promises to build more and more cyclone shelters, in appreciation of the

calamitous situation befalling the common people.

In actual practice, however, there remains a big gap between such wordy promises and realistic, desirable anticipation of crises generating from natural disasters. Even though there may be, at times, certain advances in that direction they fall through when put on the anvil. They are stuck up, either in the beginning or midway, due to cumbersome and outdated process of implementation.

Our experience till now has proved beyond doubt that a radical change in the process of planning, providing required financial sanction and support, and in the process of implementation -- totally free from the typical intervention of bureaucracy -- will have to be ensured before it is too late.

Particularly in the matter of infrastructure building across the country, things will have to be considered in a national perspective and priorities fixed in accordance with geographical location of each disaster-prone place in the country.

In my personal estimation, the bottlenecks frequently occurring in the development sector are mostly due to centralisation of the policy options in this particular area of investment in the public sector. Added to this the human factor, with diverse and yet personal aggrandisement for material gains, has been ever intruding in preposterous manner. The ultimate cost-benefit analysis of any infrastructure purportedly erected for the common people of the locality presents a reverse ratio.

This is a perpetual malady, awaiting urgent curative measures by the government. To start with, the ADP can be segmented into six divisional programmes,

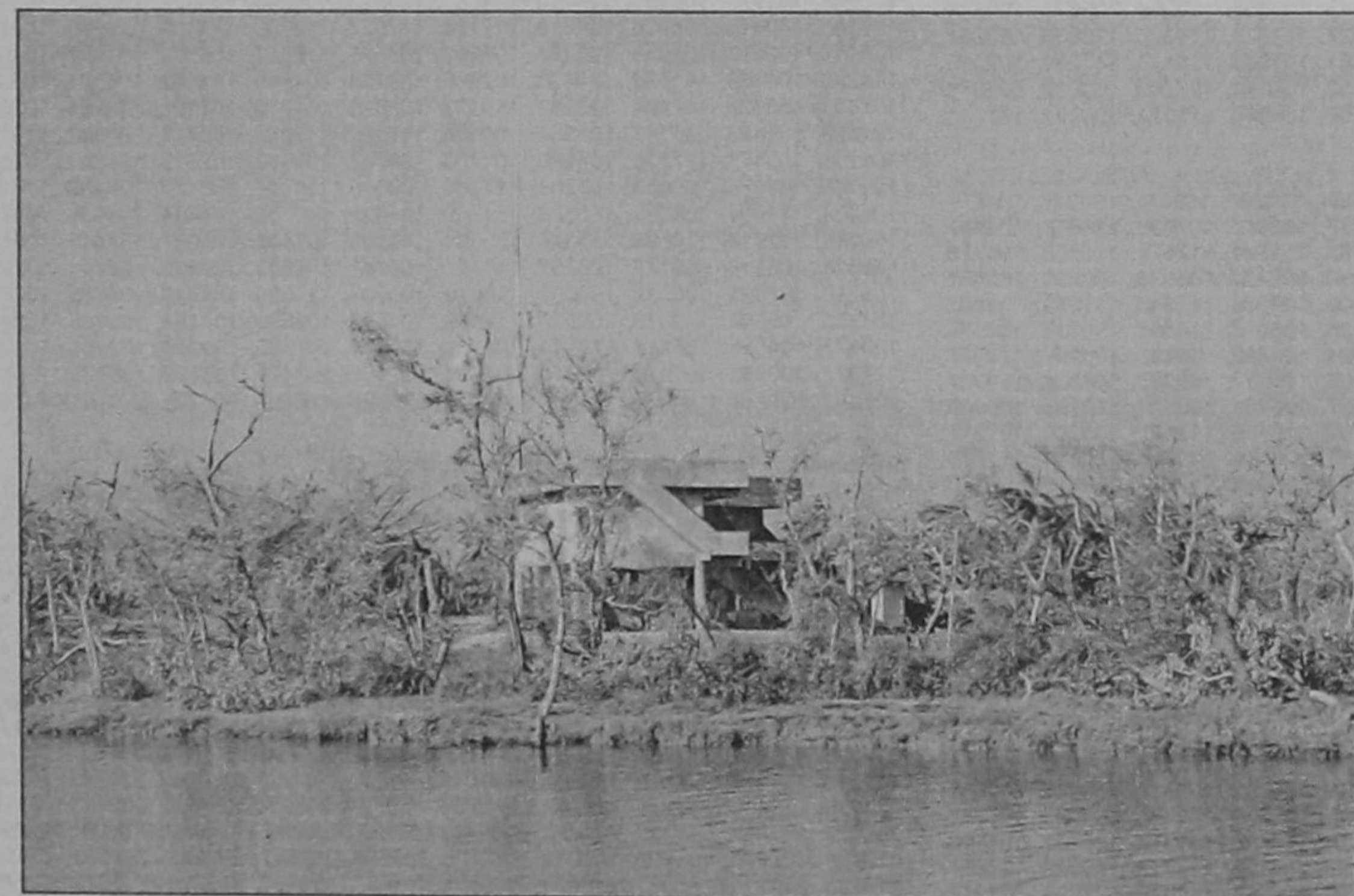
each headed by the respective divisional commissioner. In turn, each divisional commissioner will lead a task force (implementation sub-committee) duly authorised by the government. Such sub-committees will include deputy commissioners, as member-secretaries, chief engineer of PWD in the divisional headquarters, and head of the concerned department for which a project is approved for implementation.

They should also include the head of the civil engineering department of the engineering university/college at divisional headquarters, environmentalists in leading position, noted social activists, non-political headmen representing the project area, headmasters of high schools, and women representatives. At the district and upazila levels, similar sub-committees headed by deputy commissioners and UNOs will be responsible for implementation of projects in their respective areas.

In each case, contractors will have to go through a pre-qualification process for enlistment, based on the value of each project. The head, the member-secretary, and the engineering head/related head will comprise the monitoring team in every case. Upon their authentication, bills of the contractors will be paid by the concerned accountants. This is just an outline of the proposition.

It may be further developed objectively by the appropriate level of the government as it would curb corrupt practices now rampant at every stage. Let there be total decentralisation in the first place. It may not be a panacea for all ills, but it will certainly pave the way to a different scenario from now.

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Shattered by the cyclone of corruption

Pakistan needs a healing touch

The need of the hour is a "grand national compromise" that brings to an end the vilification and demonisation of some politicians, restores the military's prestige and ends its political role, limits the intelligence agencies to external security functions, and results in a government that unites the Pakistani nation against terrorism and disintegration.

HUSAIN HAQQANI

PAKISTAN is a nation in need of healing. The last one year has highlighted the many fissures that have festered below the surface for years. Unity of command, so effective in running a disciplined force like a military unit, has ended up dividing the Pakistani nation.

The first opinion poll, conducted by Gallup, after the assassination of Benazir Bhutto showed that nearly half of the sample suspected government agencies (23%) and government allied politicians

(25%) of killing Ms. Bhutto. The response to such widespread mistrust of the government is not dismissive statements by the country's rulers. A serious effort is now needed to bridge the gap between Pakistan's state and society.

General (retired) Pervez Musharraf has repeatedly shown that he lacks the ability to heal. He could end the controversy about Ms. Bhutto's death by accepting an international inquiry.

After all, if the government has nothing to hide why take refuge behind technicalities in clearing up

the matter? But Musharraf thinks like an administrator and insists that since he, as boss, knows there is nothing wrong, therefore, there is no need for a wider investigation.

The government has also limited the scope of the Scotland Yard investigation, which will only keep the controversy and the suspicions stemming from it alive.

Pakistan's armed forces, once beloved of the people, have suffered a loss of reputation because of their being mired in politics by people like Musharraf.

At a time when the new army chief, General Ashfaq Kayani, is

trying to restore harmony between the army and the people it is imperative that the perception of the military favouring or opposing any political faction or leader is completely erased.

Musharraf's lack of healing ability has become obvious in several other self-serving statements. He says he would step down if the people wanted him to quit, but he refuses to identify the method whereby the people's wishes would be determined.

He does not accept opinion polls that show 67 percent Pakistanis wanting him out. In the civilized world, a free and fair election is the only way to find out what the people want. Musharraf refuses to concede a free election.

The Citizen's Group on Electoral Process (CGEP), in its recent report, has termed the pre-poll

electoral process in Pakistan highly unfair, giving it a score of 26 on a scale of 100 in respect of overall fairness of the pre-poll environment spanning over 12 months.

The judiciary is not free to pronounce on the fairness or otherwise of the election. When Musharraf alone is the decider of what the people want, how will the people ever be able to tell him that they no longer want him?

The thoughtful US politician, Senator Joseph Lieberman, understood the problem with the election process in one visit to Pakistan, something Musharraf is unable to do after running the country for eight years.

Lieberman said: "Opposition parties have little trust the polls will be fair... If there are some bases after the elections for concluding that they were not fair and credible,

the consequences, I fear here in Pakistan, will be more division and not the unity that the country needs at this critical moment in its history, facing a serious external threat, now increasing, from al-Qaeda."

A politician would know when some of his staff and officials have become a liability for him. But Musharraf insists on retaining intelligence operatives who are widely despised by the opposition and who are only exacerbating the hatred against the government.

Some members of Pakistan's intelligence services have tortured, blackmailed, pressured or undermined too many civilian politicians, journalists and civil society activists to be credible any more as protectors of the state. The political role of intelligence services must end immediately.

Pakistan is not a company to be managed. It is a nation that must be brought together.

Politicians alone can manage popular sentiment, as PPP Co-Chairman Asif Zardari recently demonstrated when his comments about the federation, the military and the Punjab calmed down an outraged Sindh and Baloch population.

The need of the hour is a "grand national compromise" that brings to an end the vilification and demonisation of some politicians, restores the military's prestige and ends its political role, limits the intelligence agencies to external security functions, and results in a government that unites the Pakistani nation against terrorism and disintegration.

Politicians and the permanent state apparatus must become

partners, bringing to an end the subordinate relationship that the Musharraf-bred system has created with electable politicians. Pakistan must be run according to its constitution. An independent judiciary and a free media should be the guardians against abuse of power by elected officials.

Musharraf can become part of the Grand National Compromise, salvage some respect, and voluntarily give up on issues relating to a free and fair election. Or he could remain the major wound that must be dealt with before the healing of Pakistan can begin.

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