

## Our restless republic

### Food issues

#### A product of uninformed decision-making

**T**HE government has tried a raft of measures, literally exhausting all conceivable options to bring down the price of rice that spiralled out of affordability of common man. Even the open market sale (OMS) by the government has not reduced the price line significantly. Now the joint forces are planning for a market monitoring exercise from tomorrow that would include scrutinising the purchase and sale receipts at the wholesalers' and retailers' levels.

Against this backdrop, the commerce ministry under the stewardship of the new adviser on Wednesday held a meeting with top-ranking economists, governor, Bangladesh Bank and heads of some government agencies to identify the flaws in the marketing system and devise ways to address them.

They came up with three recommendations: building a system of information and market forecasting, letting the market forces operate naturally and target-oriented programmes for the ultra-poor based on free feeding for a time as well as food for work.

It is the first recommendation that we would like to focus our editorial on for the simple reason that it's the least addressed agenda but the most imperative one. We have to remove the information gaps about production, demand, supply, calamity-induced deficit, requirement of import and international prices. For instance, we have tossed around differing statistics of production, losses through floods and cyclones, domestic procurement and import requirements betraying an impression of absolutely groping in the dark. The figures of availability announced did not match with those on the ground. The dubious quality rice and wheat imported during the fag-end of the last BNP government had to be written off. With such inaccurate data-base, collation of statistics and lack of analysis we failed to formulate a strategy of preparedness against contingencies.

It is learnt from food and agriculture ministry sources that in 2006-07 fiscal, the net production of food was 2,52,44,000 metric tonnes and the requirement was 2,51,61,000 metric tonnes, but in the same year, despite the surplus, 24,20,000 metric tonnes was imported. The same is the picture for the year before! Why? There is no plausible explanation.

Little wonder, we have been dogged by stark market forecasting inadequacies. That the availability of rice was badly circumscribed by poor output in rice exporting countries was a known fact. Could we not make timely imports to cushion ourselves against any exigency. In the last one year the price of rice and wheat has increased two-fold. Look at China, India and Brazil, as pointed out by economist Dr Wahiduddin Mahmud, who were prescient of the trends and direction of the international market to build up buffer stocks to weather the storm. That's the market monitoring, we need.

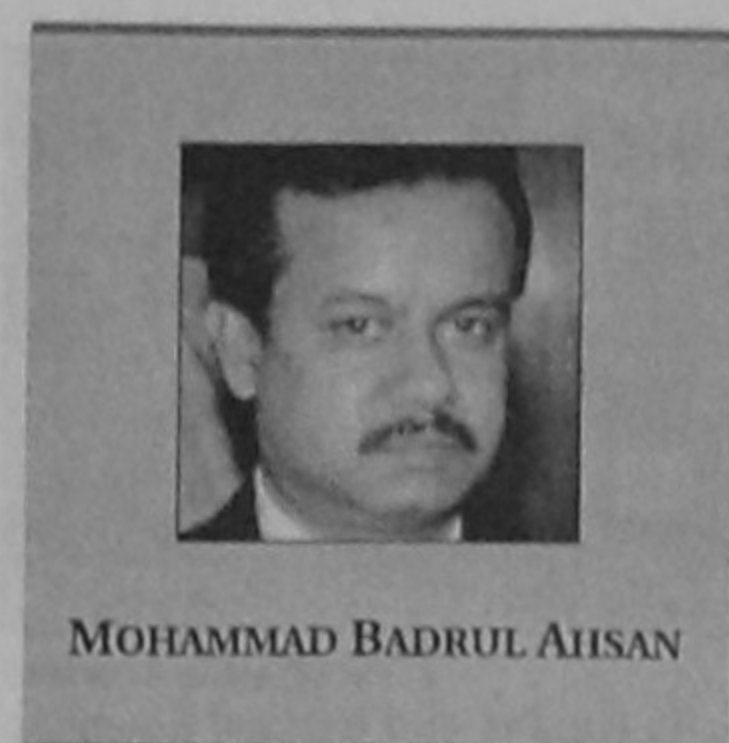
### Dialogue between government and parties

#### Let EC's talks with politicians first run their course, and quickly

**I**T is certainly heartening for the nation to know that the caretaker government means to initiate a process of dialogue with the political parties. Considering the stalemate that has existed regarding contact between the government and the politicians since the imposition of a state of emergency a year ago, reports about a planned dialogue can only add to our overall optimism about a quick return to democratic, elected government in the country.

Much as one looks forward to a dialogue between the government and the parties, however, there are the realities that must be dealt with. We begin by suggesting that, under the circumstances, it is only right that the electoral reforms process initiated by the Election Commission run its full course before any definitive measure toward a government-parties dialogue is undertaken. It is absolutely right, politically and even administratively, that the caretaker administration and the politicians get down to the business of charting a firm course to general election. Which is why an element of urgency is involved in the whole issue. But for such urgency to be addressed at the earliest, it is necessary that the dispute in the higher judiciary over who should represent BNP at the EC's reforms-related talks be settled in the court. Obviously, the nation cannot be expected to wait indefinitely and in a state of uncertainty for any dialogue between the government and the parties to begin. An expeditious end to the issue, with the High Court completing its adjudication process, is called for. And we must make it clear here that the on-going judicial process needs to be completed in days rather than weeks if the electoral road map and the goal of a transfer of power back to an elected government are to be adhered to. We respectfully draw the attention of the High Court that the matter must be disposed of quickly for the sake of election that the whole nation is waiting for.

One can hardly deny that it is crucial for the Election Commission to complete its talks with the political parties before the government initiates its own move for a dialogue. If such a procedure is not followed, there will likely be an overlapping of agenda between electoral and political reforms, thereby adding to the confusion and eventually defeating the entire purpose behind any projected government-parties dialogue. We believe that a clear, clean and quick step by step approach will inject a sense of purpose to any dialogue that the administration and political leaders get down to.



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

**I**T has been said many times in many ways. We are a nation of fickle minds, which are as quick to remember as to forget. A few weeks ago there was uproar over the sending of our priceless artefacts to a private museum in France. Before that, we were wildly ecstatic over the demolition of a high-rise building. We are also a nation that was once terribly shocked by the scandalous appointment of a fake as High Court judge. But then something happened, and we forgot. We lose interest in the by-gones as fast as boys grow tired of toys.

Could it be that the nation is suffering from the attention-deficit disorder? Why can't we pay attention and follow through something to its end? We raise issues and we erase them. What we start falls apart. It's like writing on the shifting sand, which lasts until the next wind blows.

So what happened to those

**While it's healthy to forget, it's unhealthy not to remember. We are all over the place, remembering when it's necessary to forget and forgetting when it's necessary to remember. Nietzsche once said: "To forget makes you free." The Americans are troubled by the memory of slavery. The Germans are troubled by their Nazi past. The British are troubled by their colonial atrocities. We are troubled by what? What makes us so antsy? Why are we captives of memories, and fugitives of oblivion? Or is it the other way around?**

artefacts which were already sent to France? What about the stolen pieces which were smashed? Why was there so much inordinate interest from certain quarters to send those artefacts abroad? What happened to our ambassador in France? Was his death an accident? Did he die under some kind of stress? How did the smugglers get their hands on those two pieces of artefacts? Who was responsible for their security? Why did the adviser resign? How much did he know?

Turn to the high-rise building next. It's a sad case of how something could go from sublime to ridiculous. What happened to the decision to demolish the building? One deadline was end of last November. The government was supposed to scrap the top sixteen floors and then pay off the owner for the remaining six floors. Why was the demolition work of this

### CROSS TALK

building so badly managed? Who gave the demolition contract to a company of ship-breakers? Why nothing was done for several days to recover the dead bodies rotting away under the wreckage?

Here comes the case of the pretender, the man who went to the High Court with false credentials. Where is he now? Who gave him the false certificate? Is the government taking any actions against him? Has he confessed to his crime? Will he be punished if guilty? Will his name be cleared if innocent?

These are but few examples of how we never get to the bottom of anything. Not too long ago, we heard about mindless plundering by the politicians. Big numbers were quoted; hundreds and thousands of crores were funneled out of the country. But now the numbers don't add up. How much money has been recovered?

Where are some of the convicts who have been sentenced, but still are out on the run? Where are they hiding? Why most of those arrested are accused of extortion only? What about bribery, abuse of power or money laundering? Why can't some of them be accused of violating code of conduct and oath of office?

In the early days of this caretaker government, we were told that the advisors were going to let us have their wealth statements. I don't recall if anyone of them had done it, but now there is a complete lull. Now nobody talks about it, not even after five new advisors took office last week. Another example of the vagaries of our minds; we desire as passionately as we discard.

What does it tell of us as a nation? It tells that we are pretty erratic, that we are in two minds, swayed by craze,

weighed by emotions, and that we are impulsive, reactive and restless. It tells that we are constantly instant, living for the moment, love and hate taking turns like two sides of a twirling coin.

It explains why we have allowed our history to be distorted, why governments have made amendments to textbooks as if history was made of fiction, not of facts. It explains why our leaders don't keep their promises, because they know our secret. They know we don't have much attention span. We turn the page and move on. Sooner or later, we are going to forget.

We treat history like recurring current. From time to time we remember that the war criminals of 1971 haven't been tried. From time to time we realise that the killers of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman are still at large. From time to time it occurs to us that democracy is threatened by our politicians. Every now and then we get upset because governments step out of line. Sometimes we enter the lucid moments. We are in the fog most other times.

While it's healthy to forget, it's unhealthy not to remember. We are all over the place, remembering when it's necessary to forget and forgetting when it's necessary to remem-

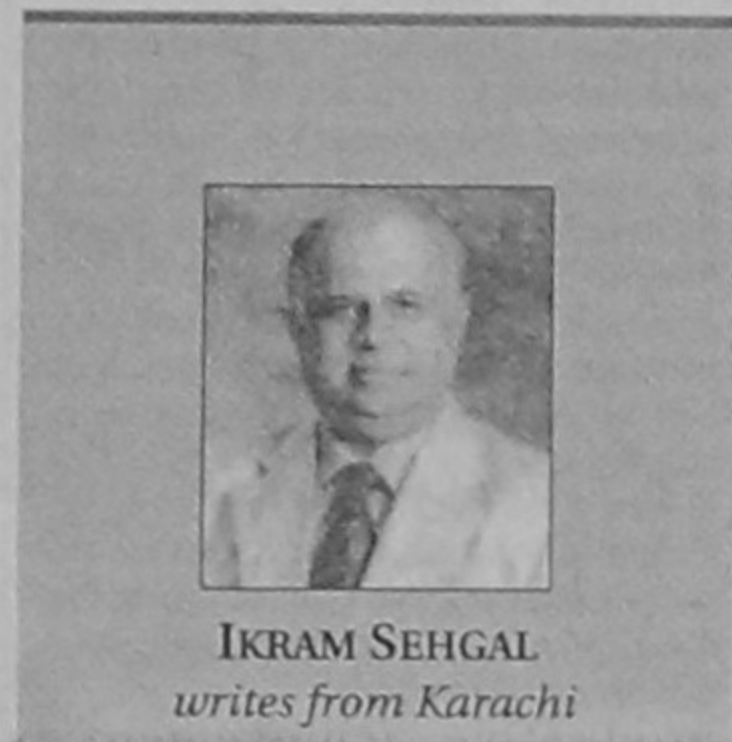
ber. Nietzsche once said: "To forget makes you free." The Americans are troubled by the memory of slavery. The Germans are troubled by their Nazi past. The British are troubled by their colonial atrocities. We are troubled by what? What makes us so antsy? Why are we captives of memories, and fugitives of oblivion? Or is it the other way around?

What happened to the pending lawsuits against an erstwhile dictator? Some were postponed, others were closed. After a while we lost count. We don't know if he has been acquitted of all charges or managed to dodge some of them. It was done like a magician's juggle, from left hand to right hand, from right hand to left, so fast that those who watch can't tell which hand has what.

Likewise, facts are shuffled back and forth many ways and many times, which creates confusion in our minds. In that confusion the real and the unreal lump together and we lose sense of space and time. One year and one week since that fateful day of January last year, we are going back to square one. Old bottle and new wine! New bottle and old wine! No matter what, we aren't changing much.

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## Consensus government



IKRAM SEHGAL  
writes from Karachi

**T**HE February 18 elections held under the aegis of the present caretaker government (and that of the present Election Commission (EC)) will be disputed as "rigged." Taking the very unlikely scenario that PML (Q) does not win a single seat, even then neither PPP nor PML (N) can reach the magic 137 number for an outright majority of the 272 NA seats on offer. With Asif Zardari claiming 2/3rds for PPP (more than 181 seats), and the PML (N) claiming a simple majority (137 seats), post-elections confrontation is guaranteed. Given the remote chance that the February 18 elections are really free and fair, it will not only be an exercise in futility, but also an invitation to anarchy. The results will not be acceptable to anyone but the winner, and falling short of a majority even the winner will cry "foul." What we have is a no-win situation!

With their political life at stake there is a desperate need for Pervaiz Elahi and party to win, come what may. The local civil administration will hardly listen to (and implement) instructions for free and fair polls contrary to the wishes of their immediate

### AS I SEE IT

**While Pervez Musharraf is on record as ruling out national government, for him it is not an option anymore, it is a dire necessity. Instead of an intelligence agencies-sponsored caretaker government, and/or one composed of politicians, the president should propose 5-6 non-controversial men and women of stature and known political neutrality to be the PM and CMs. They, in turn, should choose their cabinet colleagues, forming a "National Consensus Government" at the federal level as well as provincial level.**

political patrons. Accountability for the wrongs committed, and the amassing of wealth for years, makes it a matter of survival for them. Moreover, rigging will not be the exclusive privilege of the ruling elite, local opposition influentials will ensure their own seat, or one for their favourites. The major political parties have stated unambiguously that they will use the elections as the *raison d'être* to launch mass protest.

The present worsening economic situation as well as oil and food shortages converts this Catch-22 into a political Gordian Knot. Street protests spiralling into violence, "ala Dec 27," is not a possible doomsday scenario, it is a foregone certainty. With their hands already full coping with bloody-minded proliferation of suicide bombings as well as improvised explosive devices (IEDs), how are the law enforcement agencies expected to cope? A child can predict that a crisis is looming, why is everyone who is anyone not listening? With the ugly head of secession rearing its head, can we afford gambling the nation's existence?

While Pervez Musharraf is on record as ruling out national government, for him it is not an option anymore, it is a dire necessity. Instead of an intelligence agencies-sponsored caretaker government, and/or one composed of politicians, the president should propose 5-6 non-controversial men and women of stature and known political neutrality to be the PM and CMs. They, in turn, should choose their cabinet colleagues, forming a "National Consensus Government" at the federal level as well as provincial level. To ensure the credibility of the electoral process, the Federal Election Commission (EC) should be re-constituted.

With respect to the superior judiciary, immediately after the elections or after the new government is formed, the 6 heroes in the superior judiciary who did not take PCO-1 on Jan 31, 2000 should be restored for a limited time period as a Supreme Court Bench with one mandate, and one mandate alone, to form a new non-political non-controversial Supreme Court and Provincial High Courts. And

this should be done independent of popular feeling, only and only on merit! These "men of honour" should vet all the judges, those who did not take oath under PCO-2 and those who did, and put into place those who are really aboveboard.

It is in the president's supreme interest to stay clear of the electoral exercise. The February 18 election (or if at all a short postponement for 15-20 days) should be the responsibility of the National Consensus Government, and them alone. The Constitution does not allow more than 120 days between the assemblies being dissolved and the new ones being called into session. The EC was in violation of the Constitution when it did not seek dispensation from the Supreme Court for changing January 8 to February 18, if necessary a one-time permission can be sought with consensus of the political parties. Sweeping administrative changes, requisitioning the services of retired civil servants of repute temporarily, must be made. Of particular importance is shuffling of the police hierarchy right down to

the Thana (Police Station) level where it really counts.

Accountability of the elected representatives who will preside over the nation's destiny for the next five years is a must, this cannot be carried out in the time span available. The present "Bangladesh model" can be studied, and the weaknesses experienced by them over the past year removed and duly amended for conditions prevailing in Pakistan. Even though the NAB is fairly neutral, public perception lost faith in its credibility after the 2002 experience, when it was misused for political purposes. After NAB's Anti-Corruption Day on Dec 9, 2007, an acid test conducted personally found NAB's credibility still wanting, they need to back their abundant rhetoric and media offensive with deeds.

Neutral umpires drawn from retired persons from the judiciary, civil and military must clear every single elected representative, ensuring bye-elections if some are thus disqualified. After the elected representatives take oath in a session presided over by the last speaker, the election of the new speaker, the leader of the House and the formation of the new governments can be held in abeyance. The Constitution does not lay down the period for forming governments, but completion of this whole process should not take more than 90 days. This issue should be legally addressed by experts.

One laments the loss of objectivity in Pakistan. While taking flak for the perception of being "a

close friend of Pervez Musharraf" and, consequently, "his apologist," it would be nice if this can be conveyed to the intelligence agencies who fall over themselves, with the help of the insanely jealous, to feed him quite the contrary. Having survived the 1971 East Pakistan experience, 2008 feels like *deja-vu*. Telemachus jumped into the Roman Coliseum 16 centuries ago (almost to the day on Jan. 1, 404) to stop two gladiators from killing each other, and was stoned to death by the spectators for interfering with the gory spectacle (another version says that the two gladiators killed him). Whatever, at least the Emperor Honorius stopped gladiator fights from that day.

Pakistani Telemachus-es among the intelligentsia and the media (and there are many) should work towards ensuring that a "Grand National Compromise" is effected. The president is smart enough to understand the situation; a peaceful transition, extended perhaps, should not degenerate into cause for upheaval. Only free and fair polls (which are also seen to be free and fair) will ensure corruption-free representatives of the people taking their rightful place, presiding over the country's destiny.

There is a rapidly shrinking number who feel that the president still has the inherent patriotism and opportunity to take courageous decisions, not only for himself but also for the nation.

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## Japan's war mission gets a controversial boost

MONZURUL HUQ

**A**RTICLE 9 of the Japanese constitution is seen by many around the world as a worthy example that nations should try to follow if their real desire is to turn the world into a place without war and self-destruction. The present Japanese constitution, that came into effect in 1948, is the only one in the world that renounces war as a sovereign right of a nation, and rejects the right of belligerency of the state.

But this reality surrounding the constitution might also paint a somewhat distorted picture that the country is an outright pacifist one, denouncing any kind of war effort anywhere in the world. Such assumption might have been true in the days when the war-renouncing constitution was promulgated sixty years ago.

The country, at the time, still had visible scars of a devastating war that forced many to rethink about the rationality of hostility

and destruction, and, hence, it was not difficult for the occupation authorities of the United States to force upon a reluctant Japan a constitution that since then has been standing unique in the world.

At the same time, it was also in those earlier days that serious efforts were made, both on the part of Japan and also on the part of the world that was instrumental in forcing the unique constitutional provision forbidding the country not only to wage war in the future but also of even possessing a machinery considered synonymous with war efforts, to get rid of what some had termed as an "honest mistake" of an innocent time.

From time immemorial, war had always been a way of the rich, either to protect their acquired wealth or become even richer. Though there is no shortage of war initiatives in many of the poorest of the poor regions in the world, the rich have always played a significant role in such conflicts, and still are.

If they are not overtly involved in those wars, their economies are, directly or indirectly, because all those machineries of death that are in use are essentially made in rich countries and find their way to the poor conflict prone regions through "pragmatic" business transactions.

As a result, the desire to wage war with the idea of punishing those who dare to stand in their way had always been, and still is, the luxury of the rich. The reality of the present day world with US war machineries moving around the world is a stark reminder of that sad reality.

So, when a country becomes rich, its desire to grease the war machines increases significantly, too, keeping more or less the same pace.

Japan is a unique example of that reality in global politics. Article 9 of the Japanese constitution was essentially a product of the time when Japan was poor and battered. Now that Japan has once again

become rich, much richer than what the country was during the turbulent war period, the desire to grease the war machineries too has witnessed a renewal.

The constitutional provision was first bypassed in the early 1950s when, after the outbreak of the Korean war, Japan was encouraged by the same United States that forced the war-renouncing article on the Japanese constitution, first to create a national police force and then to opt for an armed force under the disguise of a funny and distorted name.

The end of the Cold War rivalry in international politics paved the way for Japan to allow its troops to venture overseas as part of the United Nations peacekeeping missions. Once again, the constitutional provision was tactfully bypassed by taking stopgap decisions in the Diet that allowed the dispatch of troops for a limited period.

Then, in the early twenty-first century, came the Iraq war, and

Japan became a willing partner of that war effort of President George W. Bush. Japanese self-defense forces personnel were dispatched to Iraq where they remained for more than two years in a declared mission of reconstruction. These are all known facts, of which much has been reported in the international media.

What many around the world are not aware of is Japan's participation in America's war against her self-created enemies had started much earlier than Iraq. It was soon after 9/11 that President Bush declared war against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and Japan was one of the first countries to express her willingness to participate in that war.

In November 2001, the Japanese Diet enacted a law that allowed Japan to dispatch self-defense forces ships to the Indian Ocean to help US-led war efforts in Afghanistan. Since Japanese policy makers still consider any direct involvement in wars as a violation

of the constitutional provisions that cannot be easily justified, they are always in search of an easy way out.

In the case of the Indian Ocean, the way out was to provide free of charge fuel that is essential to run the war machineries in the Afghan operation. The free fuel supply attracted others to the mission, and even Pakistanis are sending their naval ships deep down to the south of the Indian Ocean to avail the opportunity of free supply of much desired fuel.

As the price of oil is maintaining its spiraling rise, the Japanese offer suddenly turned out to be a very lucrative one, and the Indian Ocean coalition was utterly disappointed when the upper house of the Japanese parliament rejected a bill in early November that would allow the country to continue the refueling mission. The government of Japan had no other option but to suspend the mission and call the ships back to the country.

The Japanese political arena has

since then been involved in the debate of whether to give in to the pressure of Tokyo's most powerful ally and restart the mission, or to be defiant and hold an independent position.

For the administration of Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, this has been the first real test of authority since the coalition lost control of the upper house of the Diet in July. The coalition eventually resorted to Article 59 of the constitution that provides a mechanism to solve the dispute in case the two houses split on decisions concerning adoption of bills.

The article states that when the two houses vote against each other on a bill, the bill "becomes a law when passed a second time by the House of Representatives by a majority of two-thirds or more members present." The ruling coalition used that provision to overturn the decision of the House of Counselors and passed the bill using its numerical strength in the lower house.

The passage was the first time in 57 years that a bill defeated in the upper house was passed at the second attempt in the lower chamber.

The Ministry of Defense wasted no time in ordering the maritime self-defence forces to prepare for a restart of the refueling mission, and the US ambassador in Japan praised the effort as a sign of Japan's continued commitment to make the world a better place. As a result, Japan's silent war effort might have received a timely boost through the use of a complex mechanism.

But what the long-term impact of that controversial move will be is yet to be ascertained. The Fukuda administration's approval rating is already running low, and what seems to be sure is that the division at the Diet over an important issue will not be of any help in reversing the trend.

Monzurul Huq writes from Japan.