

# National government: Some thoughts

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ANIS CHOWDHURY

THE change in the political landscape of the country, with the takeover by the present caretaker government, has given rise to the expectation of a national government. The proposal for a national government has met with mixed reactions from various political parties, and there seems to be considerable confusion with regard to the concept and the process of formation of a national government. There are also doubts about its effectiveness and stability, especially when the political system remains adversarial or parochial.

The discussion about a national government and national consensus has been in the political arena of Bangladesh for quite some time. If my memory serves me correctly, the demand for a national government was aired by a number of personalities and political parties soon after the independence of the country. However, it never materialised due to a lack of clarity about the concept and the process of formation of such a government.

The term "National Government" is used normally to refer to a coalition of some or all major political parties. In history, one can find examples of national governments, such as the all-party coalitions of Herbert Henry Asquith

and David Lloyd George in the First World War, and of Winston Churchill in the Second World War.

There were also some kinds of national governments in the UK during 1931-1940, which were formed in the wake of economic and political crises due to the Great Depression of the early 1930s. Thus, one can see that national governments are formed at times of national emergency or crisis.

But there are other occasions when a national government may arise. This happens when no one party achieves a clear majority, or fails to put together a viable coalition of majority members. In such a situation, a national government is

formed by default, or is "forced upon" a nation. The current German government or that of Israel are examples of this kind.

Generally, a national government is formed with the representation of parties according to the proportion of their members in parliament. This justifies those who opined in favour of forming a national government only after the election.

But problems may arise if, among the two dominant parties, one manages to have a very narrow majority of members, but wins fewer popular votes. This can happen when one party wins mostly with a very narrow margin and the other wins with big margins, but still fails to secure a majority in parliament.

One way out of this kind of impasse would be to elect the prime minister from the majority party, but have the number of ministers according to the proportion of votes each party receives. One also needs to find an acceptable formula to distribute the portfolios.

Once the issues relating to the formation of a national government are settled, doubts may still remain about its effectiveness. The parties can pursue their own separate agendas and attempt to undermine the programs of a ministry headed by another party.

Generally, compared to an "emergency" national government, a "forced" national government is less likely to be stable and effective due to a lack of a commonly agreed agenda.

Therefore, what is crucial is a national consensus on our goals and strategies. How do we achieve a national consensus? Can our political leaders and parties agree on common national goals and strategies?

French President, Charles de Gaulle, once famously said: "I have come to the conclusion that politics is too serious a matter to be left to the politicians." This obviously sounds very offensive; there are many dedicated and selfless politicians who command enormous respect for

their sacrifices in the past.

However, in the wake of the events leading to the emergency rule and the formation of the present caretaker government, a kind of Gaullist sentiment appeared to be widespread in the community.

However, offensive it may be, the newly elected prime minister of Australia, Mr. Kevin Rudd, expressed a very similar sentiment as President de Gaulle when he recently announced a plan for a summit involving 1000 of the nation's best and brightest to discuss 10 long-term critical issues.

Mr. Rudd noted: "Government, irrespective of its political persuasion, does not have a monopoly on policy wisdom ... For too long Australian policy-making has been focused on short-term outcomes dictated by the electoral cycle. If Australia is to effectively confront the challenges of the future, we need to develop an agreed national direction that looks at the next 10 years and beyond."

The summit will be co-chaired by

the prime minister and the vice-chancellor of the University of Melbourne, and the 1000 delegates will be there in their own right, not as representatives of interest groups or organisations.

This kind of initiative is not new. The former Australian prime minister, Bob Hawke, convened a similar national summit in 1983, immediately following his election victory. The summit chalked out the national agenda for radical economic and institutional reforms that set the foundation for unprecedented prosperity in Australia over the past two decades.

Lessons can also be drawn from the success of "consensus politics" in the Scandinavian countries since the end of the Second World War in achieving a very high living standard for their people. In the Scandinavian countries, the government and the opposition party or parties are largely in agreement over the key matters they have responsibility for. They may disagree over the details but not with

the bigger picture.

The main political parties in each country were in agreement about matters such as the provision of a Welfare State, and regeneration of industrial and international co-operation. Independent academic research findings significantly influence consensus based public policy-making by the Scandinavian politicians.

In my opinion piece in this daily (April 28, 2007), I suggested that the current caretaker government should convene a national summit of stakeholders to determine a nationally agreed agenda of reforms while it was enjoying widespread public support.

Perhaps it is still not too late for such a national summit. We must initiate the process of identifying our long-term challenges and strategies in order to deal with them. We have no alternative to this if we are to become a stable, prosperous nation.

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# Davos meet promises creative capitalism

The CEOs observed that Bangladesh's image was better than that of many other countries, but they were worried about the vulnerability of the country's economy. They wondered whether credible political leadership would be in place through reforms after the elections.

MD. MASUM BILLAH

THE annual meeting of the World's Economic Forum in Davos ended with some hopes, aspirations, promises and warnings. This year's event drew nearly 30 heads of states or governments, more than 110 cabinet ministers, and several hundred corporate titans.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, ex-prime minister Tony Blair, US ex-secretary of state Henry Kissinger, UN chief Ban Ki Moon, rock star activist Bono, and billionaire philanthropist Bill Gates steered the discussions away from the global economy and geopolitics towards issues such as malaria eradication, poverty alleviation and climate change. Changing climate stands as a major concern across the globe, jeopardising the world economy, and this gave a special momentum to this event this year.

Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed drew the attention of the partici-

pants at Davos by highlighting the two major concerns Bangladesh constantly fights against, the effects of climate change and lack of duty-free access to the EU and American markets. Tony Blair, co-chairman of the forum, voiced strong support for Bangladesh in these two aspects, as Bangladesh has to pay a heavy loss almost every year due to nature's wrath. The very recent, devastating Cyclone Sidr brought untold misery to the people of the coastal region, putting huge undue pressure on the government.

The rising RMG sector has suffered a serious blow due to labour unrest. It also faces threats and challenges, as it has to vie with other ready-made garments exporting countries. It further faces problems due to the lack of duty-free access to European Union countries and the markets of US. Our CA has rightly pointed out the problems, which gave food for thought to the participants who, this year, put emphasis on poverty alleviation and hunger, and extended opportunities to resource starved countries like

Bangladesh.

Asian Development Bank president H. Kuroda said to Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed: "I'm greatly impressed with your government's performance, particularly the reforms brought about in governance and economic sectors." He assured the Bank's continued support for infrastructure and power and energy sector development in Bangladesh.

Dr. Fakhruddin urged foreign entrepreneurs to work as investment ambassadors of Bangladesh. Representatives of foreign companies who have already made investments in the country called for implementation of reforms in the financial sector to attract more overseas investment.

Foreign corporations want to see the actual implementation of reforms so far undertaken by the government in the financial sector. This fact was disclosed by Bangladesh's permanent representative to the UN Office in Geneva, Ambassador Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya, who accompanied

the chief adviser to Davos.

Dr. Fakhruddin and the CEOs of seven leading companies had discussions during a dinner at a hotel in the snow-covered hilly resort town of Davos. He apprised them of the political and economic background before the incumbent caretaker government took over, as well as the administrative and economic reforms undertaken by his government in the past one year.

The business representatives appreciated the government's reform agenda, particularly the steps taken against corruption. They said that power generation was one of the fundamental elements for attracting foreign investment, and wanted to know if coal and gas in Bangladesh were being exploited adequately.

Here lies our weakness; we have failed to ensure the proper exploitation of our natural resources like coal and gas. Definitely, Bangladesh could have established itself as a flourishing industrialised country if her natural resources had been used properly. The failure to do so can be attributed to political unrest and the non-commitment of the politicians.

However, Dr. Fakhruddin assured them that the caretaker government was trying hard to create an enabling atmosphere for foreign investment, and that there was potential for investment.

The CEOs observed that Bangladesh's image was better than that of many other countries, but they were worried about the vulnerability of the country's economy. They wondered whether credible political leadership would be in place through reforms after the elections. The Chief Adviser gave them word that his government was going to arrange an absolutely free, fair and democratic election, through which the country-men could get able public representatives.

The CEOs suggested time-bound decision on investment, and equal treatment for foreign companies. The government must give serious thought to this issue. If the foreign investors don't feel confident, surely the flow of foreign investment will be thin, curbing our economic development further.

The Davos event prided itself on showing the caring side of capitalism, although participants have criticised it for trumpeting big ideas on big issues in public while actually expending most of the time on backroom deals.

From the same Davos podium, the world's richest man, Bill Gates, announced a grant of \$19.9 million over three years to initially help place improved rice varieties and related technology into the hands of 400,000 small farmers in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Farmers are expected to achieve a 50%

increase in their yields within the next ten years. Rice is staple food for 2.4 billion people, providing more than 20% of their daily calories intake, and upto 70% for the poorest of the poor.

Gates said: "If we are serious about ending extreme hunger and poverty around the world, we must be serious about transforming agriculture for small farmers, most of whom are women."

The cash injection is to fund projects to improve soil quality, milk production, irrigation, and seed development in a host of poor African and Asian countries. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation would enable the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) to acquire new funding to tackle some of the biggest unresolved problems in agriculture. The grant to IRRI is part of a package totalling \$306 million, which nearly doubles Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's investment in agriculture, development initiatives in 2006.

The session on "Dividing the World Again," moderated by Dominique Rossi, stood out as really interesting. Wu Jianmin of China maintained that the agenda revealed the western psyche of following a policy of "divide and rule" to dominate the world.

Asian values believe in uniting the world by strengthening the Commonwealth and working out



Promises, promises .... to be kept?

compromise on contentious issues. Corporate responsibility, rather than profit, took centre stage in Davos on January 25 as the annual get-together of business chiefs turned its attention to issues of health, aid and development.

The coordination of policies should not be entirely confined to the world's advanced countries but should also be inclusive of developing countries' views. This was another important message of the meet, despite the dividing rule policy that surfaced in the meet. United Nations chief, Ban Ki Moon, challenged the delegates at Davos "to renew a commitment to the UN

Millennium Goals aimed at halving the extreme poverty, boosting health and education, and further improving the condition of women across the developing world by 2015."

Bill Gates said: "The challenge here is to design a system project, and a recognition to do more for the poor." He called for a new form of "creative capitalism," which could be achieved through the concerted efforts of both resourceful and resource-starved countries.

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# A great lawyer

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

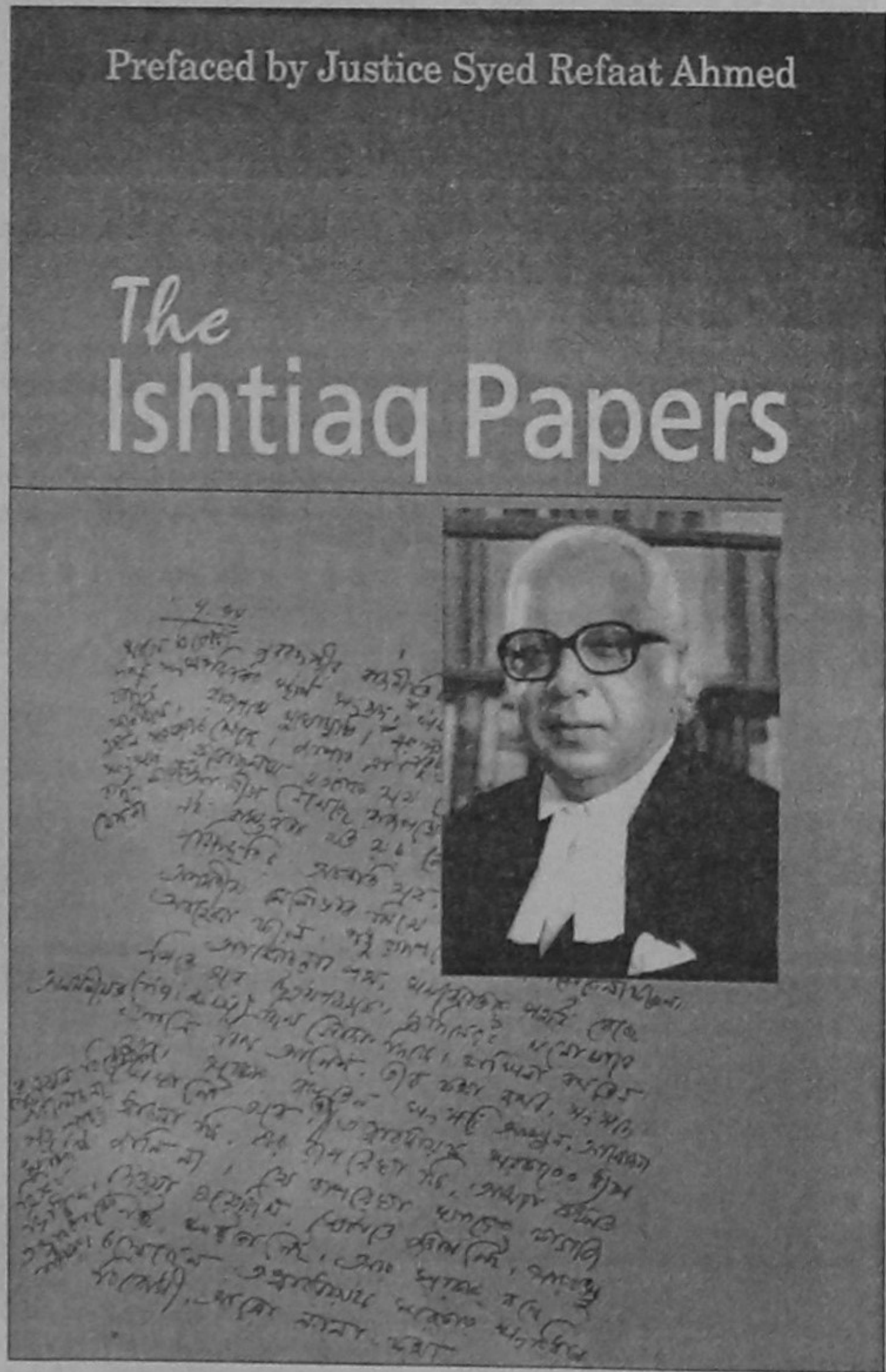
SYED Ishtiaq Ahmed (1932-2003) is best remembered by his admirers and jurists in Bangladesh and the rest of South Asia not only as a specialist in constitutional law but also as an eminent non-political activist who took special interest in trying to find a pragmatic solution to the existing problem of dysfunctional politics within our country. Concerned about the prevailing "closed shop trade union" syndrome that afflicts most political parties in Bangladesh, Syed Ishtiaq Ahmed (a former attorney-general of Bangladesh and an adviser to two successive caretaker governments) and a few others had the courage to try and find an effective method out of the madness.

It would be fair to agree that this informative posthumous publication, which has coincided with the commemoration of the 76th birth anniversary of the author, carries with it the "intrinsic worth" of being a serious documentation and record of the development of events associated in the nation's quest for institutionalising a democratic order.

Interested since the early eighties in organising the "anti-autocracy movement" (also known as the "movement for the restoration of democracy") along with other eminent lawyers of the Supreme Court Bar Association, Ishtiaq Ahmed gradually emerged in the following years as a committed champion of democracy and the Rule of Law.

His pro-active and conscientious role in trying to find a practical solution to the political imbroglio in the beginning of the nineties firmly established him as one who was able to discern and identify least common denominators within "competing and discordant notions of neutrality as propounded by the key political parties" in Bangladesh.

This book will be of great interest to discerning readers and political commentators, particularly in the context of the frustrating nature of the current political process as it obtains here. This aspect assumes importance, given the efforts under-



taken by Syed Ishtiaq and his four other concerned friends, which eventually led to the emergence of the caretaker concept and the 13th Amendment to the Constitution.

The subjects and issues covered in the publication are complex and legal in their nature. The author has, however, made them both readable and easy to comprehend through a style, both in English and Bangla, that flows freely and generates interest. He has, for this purpose, chosen a simple approach. In this context, the best example is the very first chapter, and the manner (laced by a tinge of humour) in which the genesis of the

political problem of boycott is traced within our parliament.

It is interesting to be reminded that what started with the issue of Palestinians being gunned down by Jewish extremists on February 25, 1994 in Hebron has now unfortunately become part of the parliamentary democratic culture in our Jatiyo Sangshad.

The author, in his notes, has not only carefully followed the evolution of the controversial political problems in 1994 and 1995 but has also enriched the narration and analysis with references to various cases, judicial decisions, and details of views expressed

by the chief protagonists involved with the political dynamics.

His commentary in this regard will reveal to the reader the steps and measures that eventually led to the well-known "Ishtiaq formula." The re-prints of newspaper reports of that period will also be of immense benefit for researchers and political scientists.

The reader will realise through the second section of the book, entitled "The 1996 Caretaker Government at Work," that the demand for free, fair and credible elections is something that has persisted within our body-politic for nearly two decades. He will also find it most useful to be informed about the manner in which the intricate political crisis was managed and resolved by the caretaker administration in 1996.

In a matter-of-fact manner, the author outlines how the interim government, during its short tenure, dealt with emerging challenges, discharged both routine and policy functions, and ensured the holding of general elections for the Members of Parliament peacefully, fairly and impartially. I feel that the present Election Commission and the current caretaker government would do well to read this section of the book in particular. It might help them in the successful performance of their expected tasks.

This publication assumes special significance not only for the wealth of historical details but also for the practical advice with regard to the approaching of constitutional complexities.

The preface acknowledges that this publication has been a collective effort. Those associated in this enterprise deserve thanks for having presented to a wider audience the background of a successful tale that harnessed necessary political will and foresight to overcome political intransigence.

"The Ishtiaq Papers" edited and prefaced by Justice Syed Refaat Ahmed, published by The University Press Limited, 152 pages, Taka 350/-

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# How old is too old?

Americans have been lucky in the health and well-being of their leaders. No president has died in office of natural causes since Franklin D. Roosevelt 60 years ago. And no president in recent memory has become seriously ill unless you count Ronald Reagan, whose press contingent saw signs during his second term consistent with the Alzheimer's with which he was later diagnosed. When first inaugurated, Reagan was more than two years younger than McCain would be if he became president.

ANNA QUINDLEN

RACE, gender -- they're both up for grabs in this presidential election. It's age that has become the new taboo in a vitality culture.

Here's my unscientific theory about the presidency: it ages a person in dog years. Each year in office is roughly equivalent to seven years in the life of an ordinary citizen. I base this on before-and-after photographs of the occupants of the Oval Office, who frequently look as though they've spent their time in captivity, being beaten with sticks. Which may help explain why 71-year-old John McCain, who actually has been beaten in captivity, may think that the fact that he would be the oldest person ever to enter the job is immaterial. In this, alas, he is mistaken.

Fifty is the new 35. You're not getting older, you're getting better. American culture has rejected the very notion of aging. Older people seem younger today, thanks to diet, exercise, Botox and often inappropriate clothing.

The gentle but inevitable passing of the guard that once gave young people an opportunity to rise has stuttered and sometimes stopped. Ergo the slogan "Age is just a number," the vitality-culture equivalent of "The check is in the mail."

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Our election routine today surely militates against advanced age. What we've gained in longevity and health since the Lincoln-Douglas debates, we've lost in the amped-up primary process. The candidates subject themselves to a schedule in which none of them gets a decent rest for two years in order that one of them might win a job in which there will be no decent rest for at least four.

I suppose you can argue that that is good preparation for the presidency. Forging on, exhausted, is right up there with podium presence and policy knowledge as a basic job description.

Senator McCain likes to say he has good genes on his side. It is not every 71-year-old man whose mother stands by as he gives a stump speech. At 95, Roberta McCain is still elegant and ambulatory, the sort of person for whom the expression "sharp as a tack" might have been invented: not long ago she went on television and blamed the Mormons for scandals that plagued the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics

while her son sat beside her looking slightly pained.

But the senator is not your average man of his age. He takes stairs slowly and cannot lift his arms to comb his hair. One reason few people want to address his age, or his infirmity, is the valour of his Vietnam service. It's humbling to consider that he broke both arms and a leg when his fighter jet was shot down, then suffered fractured shoulders and broken ribs when he was tortured during five and a half years as a POW.

You can tell he thinks it should be humbling, too: when a boy at one event asked him respectfully if he was too old for the job, he responded with his trademark acerbic humour: "Thanks for the question, you little jerk."

But the kid was only acknowledging the elephant on the campaign trail. There's been plenty of talk during primary season about gender and race; it's age that has become taboo. While there is a minimum age of 35 to be elected president, there's no maximum. Perhaps that's why it's more acceptable to suggest that a contender is callow than over the hill. Each time I'm described as middle-aged the 25-year-old still living deep inside me lets out a scream.

Granted, I now have a perspective, a wisdom, a more comprehensive body of knowledge, if only I could remember it. But words elude me occasionally, which is challenging for a wordsmith. More important,

there's a certain spark that now smoulders sometimes. So where's the sweet spot, that moment when the timeline of experience intersects perfectly with the trajectory of excitement? It's different times for different people, but it seldom occurs late in life.

Please, please -- don't feel the need to let me know that you're 82, swim every morning and finish the New York Times crossword, in ink, even on Saturday. I'm aware that there are women and men who perform brilliantly at arduous jobs far past the time the rest of us would be phoning it in or tuning it out. But the job McCain seeks is like no other, in its demands and its import.

It's significant that while the old mandatory retirement age of 65 has been largely junked, there are still age limits for jobs like airline pilot or police officer, the kinds of jobs that require some of the same skills as the presidency -- unwavering mental acuity and physical energy.

Political operatives say that his age makes McCain's choice of a running mate particularly critical. But if you enter the process stressing a hedge against mortality or incapacity, shouldn't that suggest something about suitability for the job in the first place?

The senator's pursuit of the presidency reminds me a bit of those women who decide to have a baby in their late 50s. The impulse is understandable, the goal possible. But, looking at all the facts, and the actuarial tables, is it really sensible?

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