

## Jamuna Bridge in jeopardy? Take expeditious action to repair the damage

THE most disconcerting aspect of the matter is that even after two years of the discovery of a crack in the country's most expensive and strategically important structure, the Jamuna Bridge, very little substantive action has been initiated to repair the damage.

It is also equally disheartening that the only land link, for us a marvel of sorts, which has changed the dynamics of trade, travel and commerce between the northern part of Bangladesh and the rest of the country, is at some risk.

The natural question to ask about the very sad development is how and why did this happen? It is inconsiderable that a strategic construction that was commissioned less than a decade ago and took almost a decade to complete has developed serious flaws that may render it useless unless prompt action is taken. This fact together with the existence of other flaws of various definitions, as reported in a local daily, demonstrates the utter lackadaisical way that maintenance work has been done in respect of the most vital and, by the same token, the most vulnerable key point installation of the country.

We fail to understand why we cannot hold the company responsible for any defect in the construction of the bridge and have it do the necessary repair work as per the provisions of the contract. What is perhaps baffling is the comment of the expert committee that was set up immediately after the crack was discovered in 2006 to look into the affair, that there are design flaws that may be responsible for the crack in the bridge.

We feel that an inordinate length of time has already been wasted in discussions and efforts to determine the responsibility for the flaws in design etc. We feel that the priority must be on repairing the bridge. By all means do everything necessary for the repair and sustained maintenance of Jamuna Bridge. Surely the party or parties responsible for the state of affairs must be identified and held to account. But the repair work must be initiated most expeditiously. It need not be restated that nine stitches may not be enough to save one of our most important assets from irreparable damage if any further delay in initiating corrective measures is brooked.

## CHT people's access to justice system

A long overdue step taken

PEOPLE in the CHT will henceforth have access to the judicial system, as the government has decided to set up criminal courts in three districts in the region within the next 10 days. It is indeed not justifiable that no such courts could be instituted in the districts even in 36 years, which left the hills people out of the purview of the judiciary -- a strange yet stark truth of their lives.

The hills people were on their own to settle cases through arbitration by the village headmen -- a primitive way of dispensation of justice. It amounted to a clear denial of their legal rights as citizens of Bangladesh. The High Court ruling directing the government to set up civil and criminal courts in the CHT under the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation (Amendment) 2003 will fulfill a long-standing demand of the local people. It will make their task of seeking justice much easier as people from the remotest corners of the CHT will no longer have to travel to Chittagong to attend courts, which in some cases was both energy and time consuming.

It has been reported that the deputy commissioners and the divisional commissioner will continue to address civil matters until civil courts are set up after amending the existing laws. They will continue to discharge such duties until complete arrangements are in place as per the HC directive. The process of instituting new courts should not take much time as the necessary infrastructure is already present in the district towns. The point is relevant as provisional arrangements should not continue for long.

Access to the judiciary system is a basic right of the hills people which was ignored by successive governments in the past. It reflected a lack of concern for a section of citizens that bordered on callousness.

Now that the stage is set for setting up courts in the CHT, the decision makers should act with due urgency, taking into consideration the importance of the issue. It is not a question of offering something new to the CHT people, rather it will give them what other citizens of the country are already enjoying -- access to the justice system.

## Ramblings at random ...



SHAHNOOR WAHID

WE do not need high profile seminars or World Bank prescription or a series of articles to perceive the hard reality that Bangladesh needs honest, smart, intelligent, educated and energetic leadership to elevate itself to the ranks of the other developed countries of Southeast Asia. Such leaders with vision and drive in some of those countries have worked round the clock to pull their own people from abysmal poverty and disease to build a new country altogether. As a result, they now dominate the markets in Asia, as well as many in the West, as leaders in the global scene.

But where do we stand today? Do we have wonderful stories to tell about our economy, education, research or health care? Whatever the private sector has achieved was possible because of its tenacity and resolve to overcome various obstacles that came in the way. Local administration and hostile international politics were always out

## SENSE & INSENSIBILITY

But where do we stand today? Do we have wonderful stories to tell about our economy, education, research or health care? Whatever the private sector has achieved was possible because of its tenacity and resolve to overcome various obstacles that came in the way. Local administration and hostile international politics were always out there to scare them off.

Despite all that, our private sector flourished over the years. Nevertheless, it needs to be said that holistic growth of a country cannot happen unless the government of the day plays the role of a facilitator, carrying out negotiations at the national and international levels.

For this reason we need politicians who will be able to foresee the future of the country fifty years from today, negotiate effectively at international forums, take pragmatic decisions regarding the burgeoning population and increasing poverty, and take measures to diversify the country's export items. They would never hesitate to control corruption, and would allow all the institutions like the EC, ACC and Public Service Commission to work independently and effectively.

But what do we have in reality? We have politicians who sleep late in the morning or always remain surrounded by packs of hungry wolves. Talk to them and you will find out soon that they have no idea

about what potential Bangladesh has with regard to developing the IT sector, which might bring billions of dollars to the country.

Ironically indeed that our politicians cannot think beyond five years. They have no plan with regard to controlling population or alleviating poverty. All they would do is quote from the PRSP. These people have nothing new to say once they run out of script. And if they try to innovate they pathetically end up sounding nonsensical.

Right now our very own Brig. Gen (Retd) Hannan Shah is back in business again. He has picked up that *chonga* of his and begun to canvass with renewed vigour. He is asking the runaway leaders of BNP to say *tauba* and accept Begum Zia's leadership and recognise Delwar Hossain as the legal Secretary General, nothing more, nothing less.

He has been saying this in between his frequent visits to jail, and he has started to say this again after coming out of jail. He now thinks that the Chief Election Commissioner has committed a

*kabira guna* (unforgivable sin) by inviting Major Hafiz to a dialogue on the coming election ignoring Khandaker Delwar. But, alas, no one seems to be interested to listen to him.

No doubt, by doing so, Hannan Shah is trying to create the image of a diehard person, possibly inspired by the movie named Diehard. We understand he has his eye on the coveted seat nearer to madam's throne in the Windy Castle. Frankly speaking, he should be considered for a BNP brand "Knighthood." Remember, he used to go knee-deep in flood-water and let the people hear the voice of his *netri*. But that did not fill their hungry stomachs. They needed food.

It is the same for ZA Khan, Major Hafiz, Saifur Rahman, Delwar or, for that matter, Dr. Badruddoza or HM Ershad. All of them are serving old things wrapped in new wrappers. There is no flash of brilliance in their talk or in their analysis of things. We haven't heard anything to make us want to hear more.

Our politicians react to something rather than act. They cannot

preempt things or be proactive. If you do not have the guts to say something, or protest in loud voice a wrong-doing, then you better not be in politics. Very lackluster politicians that.

What about those "veteran" politicians in the other camps? Are we all impressed by their wisdom, skill and acumen at a time when politics is passing through such rough waters? If you listen carefully, you will notice that Tofael Ahmad, Abdur Razzak and Zillur Rahman are also saying the same thing in a prefixed frequency over and over again.

If you have heard one, you have heard them all. They either repeat what the "leader" has already said, or they say something incomprehensible and then disown it. Come to think of it! Disowning a statement is an old yet pathetic ploy of our politicians. But by doing so don't they expose the poverty of courage to face one's own self?

So, it would be an understatement if we say that our politicians really sound cacophonous, like old gramophone records that are full of cuts and scratches. Do we have much to expect from them? You have the answer.

And more... Amanullah Aman has been transferred from Dhaka Central Jail to a jail in Narayanganj. It came as a reward for his arrogance, or what is popularly called here -- "damncare attitude" (whatever it means).

Last week, he was taken to PG hospital for a checkup, but after some minor tests he along with about fifty of his local *sengats* (hoodlums) walked about the hospital as if he owned the place, and then went to a canteen to have lunch. They ate, they gossiped and they guffawed in presence of some "loyal" security personnel. Aman went back to the prison van when he felt like going.

According to law, by meeting political people, talking to unknown persons on a cell phone and taking food outside, Aman has violated prison law. Don't forget he was a lawmaker himself and had sent many, many people to the same jail for little or no reason at all. There is every possibility of him coming back as a lawmaker (?) in future.

But how safe will laws be in their hands? The manner in which he took law in his own hands speaks volumes about how this new species of haughty politicians disrespect rules and regulations. They are veritably an indisciplined lot that needs to be kept in chains.

The answer to all the problems mentioned above lies in finding honest, dedicated, patriotic, educated and highly intelligent people who would sit in parliament to formulate pro-people policies and guide them on the road to progress.

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## Watershed verdict against Musharraf & Co



PRAFUL BIDWAI  
writes from New Delhi

THE Pakistani people, long chided, cheated, and put down by military rulers, have emphatically affirmed their democratic sovereignty and delivered a stinging verdict against the ruling coalition headed by the Pakistan Muslim League (Q), a puppet of General Pervez Musharraf. They have also voted decisively against religious extremism.

The voter has severely punished PML(Q) stalwarts, including venal and shrewd politicians who belong to well-entrenched "political families" with strong clan and kinship connections. They know which side of the bread is buttered and typically win all elections -- no matter on whose ticket. Their ignominious defeat clarifies the verdict's central meaning.

The message for Musharraf is simple. He asked the people to vote for his supporters. They resoundingly rejected his appeal. If he has any sense, he should quit and roll back his recent decisions, including

## THE PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

A broad-horizon agenda awaits the next government. To fulfil it, the PPP and PML(N) must reach a power-sharing arrangement which recognises, but goes beyond, their different social bases and regional characteristics. It means the PPP leadership under Asif Ali Zardari must firmly rule out a deal with Musharraf or the PML(Q), which legitimises the old order and prolongs the military's dominance.

the Provisional Constitutional Order (PCO) of November last.

The election result totally disproves the doomsayers' view that Pakistan can never develop a democratic ethos. It has far-reaching implications for balances within Pakistan's state structures because it is a referendum against the Establishment, including the army, and a vote for democracy.

One cannot fail to be impressed by the strength of the anti-army sentiment in Pakistan, probably the most intense since the Bangladesh War. This is clearly linked to the military's misuse, corruption, greed, and links with United States agendas.

This sentiment coincides with the decision of army chief Ashfaq Pervez Kiyani to sever the military's overt links with politics, withdraw army personnel from civilian jobs, and declare that the army would play no role in elections. This produced an election, which, despite flaws, was one of Pakistan's freest and fairest. The army refused to let Musharraf rig the polls.

This augurs well for the prospect

of Pakistan's demilitarisation. Democrats everywhere must welcome this. If consolidated, the trend will lead to a historic breakthrough.

The election results have 5 noteworthy features. First, the people voted in a rational, discriminating and unsentimental way. They were not excessively swayed by "sympathy" for the Pakistan People's Party owing to Benazir Bhutto's assassination. They didn't give an overwhelming mandate to the PPP or the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz).

Second, the PPP won 88 of the National Assembly's 272 elected seats. Besides its traditional stronghold, Sindh, it also did well in the North-West Frontier Province and southern Punjab. The PML(N) won 66 seats -- surpassing expectations -- because of its strong anti-Musharraf stand. This outcome, like the provincial assembly results, reaffirms the federal character of Pakistan's polity.

Third, the popular mandate favours a PPP-PML(N) coalition, which also carries other parties like the Mohajir-dominated Muttahida

Qaumi Movement (MQM), and Afsandayr Wali Khan's Awami National Party.

Fourth, the public is disillusioned with religious extremists. The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, which won 56 NA seats in 2002, suffered a stunning defeat, winning just 5 seats. This vindicates the view that the 2002 election was exceptional because it followed the US invasion of Afghanistan. Until then, religious extremists only commanded under 3 percent of the vote.

The MMA suffered a big setback in the NWFP assembly. It managed to bag a pathetic 8 seats (of 96). By contrast, the secular, left-leaning ANP won 29 seats and the PPP 18. In Balochistan too, the MMA's tally fell from 12 to 7 seats (total, 51).

The MMA's rout undermines Musharraf's claim, often bought by the West, that he is the sole bulwark against the mullahs, in particular, the possibility that they might gain control over Pakistan's nuclear arsenal.

And fifth, a PPP-PML (N)-led alliance offers the best chance to address two urgent tasks: a decisive

break with military rule, and provincial autonomy. The first is a precondition for democratisation. Without the second, the state's existence may be in jeopardy, given the autonomist/secessionist movements in Balochistan, the NWFP and tribal agency areas, and resentment in Sindh at Punjab's excessive weight in government and politics.

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Zardari, implicated in corruption cases, is vulnerable to pressure and manipulation by Musharraf and the US. He hasn't ruled out "cooperation" with Musharraf. Nor has he demanded the restoration of the judges dismissed under the November PCO.

There is an outer chance that Zardari will be tempted to try one of those super-opportunistic cut-and-paste jobs for which Pakistani politicians have gained notoriety -- for instance, by stitching together a coalition between his party and elements from the discredited PML(Q).

That would completely violate the popular mandate, and make a mockery of the democratic norm that a ruling party defeated in an

election should not be part of the next coalition government. It will almost certainly split the PPP and isolate Zardari. He must desist from that terrible course.

Pakistan, today, stands at a crossroads, similar to the turning point after the birth of Bangladesh. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto then squandered a precious opportunity to free Pakistan from the stranglehold of the army, which got discredited because it lost the war. He chose to collude with the army, and promoted Gen Zia-ul-Haq, who hanged him and plunged Pakistan into the Dark Ages.

One can only hope that Bhutto's son-in-law doesn't repeat his (Bhutto's) blunder by bestowing legitimacy on Musharraf and inviting the army to play a larger-than-life role just when it is withdrawing from politics.

The immediate priority is to rescind the November PCO, restore Chief Justice Choudhry and other dismissed judges, and cancel Musharraf's arbitrary decrees.

The world must respect the Pakistani people's verdict, and look beyond Musharraf. He's nobody's "best bet in Pakistan." Equally important, both Zardari and Sharif support the India-Pakistan peace process. It now may have a wider constituency in Pakistan than Musharraf. This is good news for India-Pakistan relations and for the prospect of a peaceful, prosperous South Asia.

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## Prospects of democracy in Pakistan



DILARA CHOUDHURY

ON February 18, Pakistan held its National Assembly and Provincial Assemblies' elections, in which President Parvez Musharraf's party Pakistan Muslim League (Q) suffered a humiliating defeat. It has secured only 55 seats in the National Assembly while it has no lead in any province except Balochistan, where the nationalist parties boycotted the elections.

The overall outcome of the elections has not been surprising. The analysts had forecasted the victory of Pakistan People's Party (PPP) if the elections were free and fair and, according to most observers, elections have been free and

The elections results also reflect the same, otherwise the PML(Q) would not have suffered such a humiliating

## PANORAMA

There are difficulties in the formation and functioning of a coalition government. The fact is that people who are imbued with a democratic political culture can successfully build a coalition and work with it. Unfortunately, that kind of culture is missing in Pakistan, and how long yesterday's foes like PML(N) and PPP can work together is yet to be seen.

with PPP having 113, PML (N) 84, PML(Q) 55, MQM 25 ANP (secular Pashtuns) 14 and others 38 seats, and a coalition government, by PPP and PML(N), is in the offing. The people of Pakistan are now expecting that a smooth transition from an authoritarian government to a democratic one will be a matter of time only. How bright are the chances of democratic consolidation in Pakistan? What are the complexities that may create hindrances to a smooth transition?

From the current scenario, it is gauged that there are a number of difficulties that need to be overcome for creating a stable environment in which democracy can thrive. First, the controversy surrounding the president's office, as well as the president himself.

In October 2007, Musharraf got himself elected as president for another five years. But the opposition wants him to resign so that they can have their own man instead. Musharraf has already turned it down. But how long he

can retain his position is a matter of speculation.

The fact is of the matter is that he is still the most powerful man in the country. This is due to the fact that the constitution of Pakistan gives him the power to dissolve the parliament without consulting any constitutional bodies or individuals.

The people of Pakistan know how draconian this power is. It is still fresh in the memory how past presidents like Khan and Legari, who together dismissed as many as three elected governments, used this power.

Many have compared the Pakistani president's power to dissolve the parliament with that of the French president, who also has similar power. But, in reality, the French president does not have such absolute power, and needs to consult the chairmen of a number of constitutional bodies before making a decision to dissolve the people's representative body.

Moreover, unlike the Pakistan

president, he is directly elected for a term of five years and, as a directly elected president, it is not unusual for him to have such constitutional power.

As such, the indirectly elected president's absolute power to dissolve the parliament as long as he has the backing of the army is not same as the French president's, and is certainly not compatible with a democratic order. The leader of PML(N) Nawaz Sharif has already threatened to clip Musharraf's power.

It is to be pointed out here that such an undemocratic feature was incorporated into the constitution by General Ziaul Haque in order to retain the army's hold over the representative body.

But PML(N)'s intention to introduce a genuine parliamentary system of government may run into a number of snags: the coalition government may not have two-third majority in the Parliament, which is needed for constitutional amendment; and it

may create adverse reaction within the army, which still remains a major player in Pakistan's politics.

In this context, most ominous has been Nawaz Sharif's threats that he would join hands with the PPP and reach a *quid pro quo* arrangement with regard to the offices of prime minister and president, so that Musharraf can be either ousted or impeached. Most analysts, however, agree that such a scenario would be highly disturbing if Musharraf himself does not resigns as per the verdict of the people. Under the circumstances, the possibility of a snap election cannot be ruled out.

Secondly, against the backdrop of an all-powerful president and a parliament controlled by his foes, the functioning of the government will be fraught with difficulties. We may again cite the French system (although it is different from Pakistan's system, it is ostensibly similar), in which the president is sometimes forced to work with a National Assembly controlled and dominated by his opponents.

President Musharraf has already declared that he was ready to work with any party that forms the government, but only the future can tell whether or not such cooperation would be possible between Musharraf and his foes.

Thirdly, there are difficulties in the formation and functioning of a

coalition government. The fact is that people who are imbued with a democratic political culture can successfully build a coalition and work with it. Unfortunately, that kind of culture is missing in Pakistan, and how long yesterday's foes like PML(N) and PPP can work together is yet to be seen.

Fourthly, it is a matter of concern that nationalist parties in Balochistan have shied away from electioneering. This fact demonstrates their total alienation from the system itself. Pakistani leaders need to pay proper attention to their genuine grievances, otherwise the democratic order may face serious challenges from the nationalist forces. Moreover, the rising militancy of the Islamic radicals will remain as a thorn in the side of the democratic order if the leaders remain busy with power sharing and the like.

Lastly, it is well known that democracy cannot flourish in the absence of democratic institutions. But most of the democratic institutions in Pakistan, due to long army rule, are in a disarray. The recent onslaught on the country's Supreme Court by President Musharraf is, in particular, a case in point.

It should be kept in mind that building democratic institutions takes both time and nurturing. But, this time, if such commitments from the leader are not forthcoming

then the nascent democratic order may be in jeopardy.

From the discussion above, it is evident that there remain a lot of impediments in the transition to democracy from authoritarian rule in Pakistan. But there a number of positive developments as well that may help the country to deal with the difficult times that lie ahead.

First, it is indeed commendable that a free, fair and violence free election has been held in Pakistan. Elections in which people can freely express their voice are the cornerstone of any democracy. By all standards, that cornerstone has been laid in Pakistan.

Musharraf's, and his party's, quick acceptance of the elections results is also very much a right step in the right direction. Most importantly, it is heartening to note that for the first time in Pakistan's history, the army remained totally neutral during the elections and has openly declared that it will not get involved in the country's politics. Secondly, the elections and the election result indicate that the people of Pakistan will not settle for anything short of democracy.

The commitment to work for democracy by the emergent vibrant civil society in Pakistan has added new dimensions to the people's aspirations. Hope is aroused when one finds that the media are playing their designated

role. These are all hopeful signs. Even then, all these developments may not be enough for the consolidation of democracy.

On top of everything, there is an urgent need for mature leadership, which would rise above self-aggrandisement and narrow self-interest in order to reap the fruits of the elections.

All political parties and the leaders must realise that there must not be any confrontational approach. They must realise that confrontations and bitter animosity bring destruction not only to the leaders but to the country as well. The onus, thus, lies heavily on the newly elected leaders of Pakistan, including General Pervez Musharraf, who must allow the assembly to work without hindrance as a sovereign body representing the hopes and aspirations of the Pakistani people.

In conclusion, one hopes for a peaceful ushering in of democratic rule in Pakistan, otherwise the country faces the dangers of more militancy by Islamic radicals, who will not settle for anything less than total Talebanisation of the country, and succumbing to the forces of separatism, especially in Balochistan. Pakistan, indeed, is now at a historical juncture.

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