

National policy for women development

A much improved version over that adopted in 2004

THE National Women Development Policy 2004, came under fire of women rights groups and civil society leaders for having done away with some of the equal rights provisions of the 1997 policy guidelines. The women development policy just announced by the interim government is an improved version on that adopted in 2004.

The policy objectives set for women development are radical by past standards. The goals include ensuring equity between men and women in every sphere of national life, women's security at national, social and family levels together with their empowerment on political, social and economic fronts.

We see women's uplift as not only a value addition to national advancement but as a power house for it. Given their success stories in various arenas, despite the lack of equal opportunity and other constraints, we are convinced if the impediments are removed they can work wonders.

Breaking all gender divides we have to make the society an equal opportunity one. But since the polity, economy and the society are not structured in a gender sensitive way we have to go for some legislation covering important aspects like health, nutrition, education, vocational training, opportunities for income, property, debt, technology and 'right to have control over moveable and immovable property earned through market management'.

The one-third representation of women in parliament, their greater participation in local bodies and above all involvement in policy making positions at the higher political, administrative and professional levels are indispensable pre-requisites for placing their development agenda on a fast-track.

The establishment of women's human rights, their salvation from the vicious cycle of poverty and elimination of discrimination against girls would be attainable as much by positive male attitudes as by wider participation of women in all spheres of life.

Women are assuming positions of higher responsibility and taking up jobs hitherto considered to be male domain, all these in their own right; now, imagine how productive, dynamic and effective they can be if the society and the government lend them the support they merit.

Of course, we need a strategy for women's development aside from a set of policy guidelines. The government will have to make coordinated efforts with national and international NGOs to implement a strategy hammered out through a consultative process with experts and civil society leaders.

Criminal negligence in hospitals

Why there was no fall-back supply of electricity?

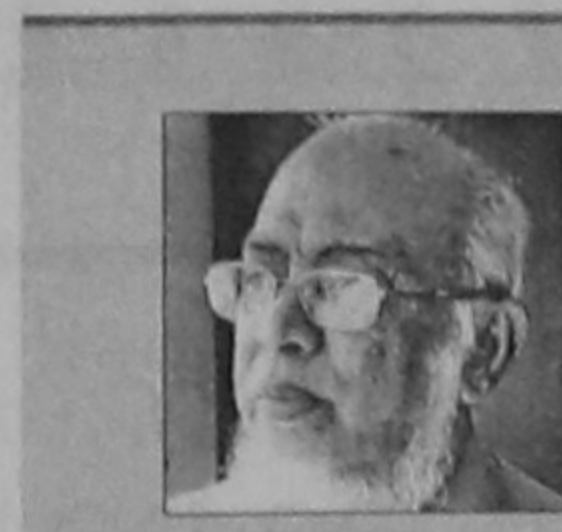
THE suffering endured by service seekers in a number of government-run hospitals, touched a new low following a 10-hour power outage at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar area. It speaks of sheer disregard for patients' lives. They failed to live up to the emergency situation by harnessing the needed logistics and thus mitigating the pain and suffering of the patients. The fact that treatment and emergency surgery were held up and ICU units remained non-functional for hours together for the lack of fuel for generators is simply unacceptable to us. That hospital authorities had no contingency plan whatsoever to face the situation became brazenly evident one more time.

We wonder why major hospitals like Shaheed Suhrawardy Hospital, Dhaka Shishu Hospital, National Institute of Traumatic Orthopaedics and Rehabilitation (NITOR), National Institute of Cardio Vascular Diseases (NICVD) etc should not have foolproof alternate electricity generation system to come to life as soon as there would be a power outage? Do we have to remind the authorities that uninterrupted electricity supply is a prerequisite for operating modern equipment for detecting and monitoring cardio-vascular diseases, run life-support system for critical patients as well as equipment for intensive care units?

We understand all the major hospitals in question have money in the contingency funds just in case they need it; but why some of it was not used to purchase diesel to run generators remains a big question. An efficient management would have set aside bureaucratic formalities at such times and taken the initiative to make the generators operational within minutes. Taking immediate measures to lessen the pain of the patients is the foremost responsibility of the physicians once they land at their doors. We take the occasion to mention that the Hippocratic oath entails the very ethos of the medical profession mitigating suffering of the sick. It is lot more than a commonplace pledge of a professional. The humane part of the medical profession is what makes a physician a revered person in society. But it seems the desired level of concern and compassion in most of our physicians and hospital authorities is an area that needs to be improved.

We hope the Adviser of Health would look into the matter and instruct the ministry officials to make the hospital install a foolproof alternate electricity generation system to avoid human misery in future.

Well past its unipolar moment



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

PERSPECTIVES

The military alone is insufficient in today's world to give one the right to rule the world, however much dominant it might be. Increasingly, it is economic strength, which makes countries rise and rule. For a long period of time, it was America and Europe, which produced and sold everything in the world. Now, Asian giants are making deep inroads into these areas of dominance.

INTOXICATED with the conquest in the Cold War, American think-tanks and school strategists started describing their great country some times as a hyper-power and at others as an indispensable superpower. Terminologies like "new American century" and "US unipolar moment" proliferated almost overnight in the lexicon of strategic literature.

Notwithstanding these accolades, a chink in the American armour was visible when Yale professor Paul Kennedy published his treatise, "Rise and fall of great powers," wherein he argued that the US was falling into the familiar historical pattern where the combination of huge military budgets and ever-larger deficits led inevitably to

the kind of "imperial overstretch" which once transformed mighty empires into shadows of their former selves.

After Kennedy's prognosis came the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union, an earthshaking event that was soon followed by Washington's decisive victory in the first gulf war with its jarring effect on the world.

This unrivalled status of America was celebrated, among others, by neo-conservatives like Washington Post columnist Charles Krauthammer who coined the phrase "unipolar moment." Being bolstered by the unexpected development on the global scene, Paul Kennedy also chose to revise his views by suggesting that Washington might have escaped the laws of history because, he noted, of the sheer size of the American economy,

and its technological prowess and military dominance, which had no parallels in history.

Krauthammer also endorsed the fact that no country had ever been as singularly dominant culturally, economically, technologically and militarily in the history of the world since the Roman empire. Yet, what a negative difference was effected during the past five years -- by the invasion and bungled occupation of Iraq particularly!

Gone with the wind is the American dream of Pax Americana! The reference to the Roman empire at this point is more appropriate to its decline rather than to its rise and its halcyon days.

Donald Kagan has made a similar observation, a dean of neo-conservatism and Kennedy's colleague at Yale. Kagan argued

that not since the Roman empire has any country had such extraordinary power as the United States after the Cold War. But the American strength is now being challenged.

This is not without reasons. There has been a major structural shift in the distribution of global powers. None can maintain -- let alone enhance -- their post-Cold War dominance. Not only have both Iraq and Afghanistan shown the world the limits of US military power, they are also exacting an increasingly fear-some toll of Washington's ability to wage war.

Echoing what Paul Kennedy argued some twenty years ago, "over stretched" is the word most aptly and frequently attached to the US military. Just as Kennedy had warned against the deadly long-term impact of budgetary deficits on empires, the Bush

presidency has seen an explosion not just of government debt -- currently more than \$9 trillion -- but also of trade and balance of payment deficits. Much of this is, of course, due to the high price of oil and gas import -- which a growing number of experts believe has become a permanent fixture of the international economy.

The effects of global geo-economy include a much-weakened dollar, and increased reliance of both the US government and US business on foreign creditors. Among these creditors are state controlled agencies, some of which -- notably those of China, Russia -- are not enthralled by Krauthammer's unipolar vision.

If, for commercial or political reasons, any of these creditors decides to dump its hundreds of billions of dollar-dominated assets -- or if key energy exporters price their commodities in a currency other than the dollar -- the economic impact is bound to be grave.

In the meantime, a role reversal for supremacy is already underway. The military alone is insufficient in today's world to give one the right to rule the world, however much dominant it might be. Increasingly, it is

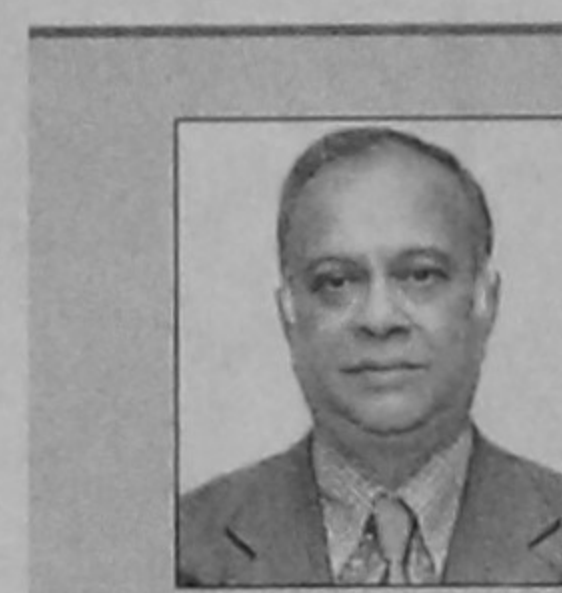
economic strength, which makes countries rise and rule. For a long period of time, it was America and Europe, which produced and sold everything in the world. Now, Asian giants are making deep inroads into these areas of dominance.

The multinational structure was invented by the Americans to dominate most parts of the world through its strategy of mergers and acquisitions by simply going into another country, buying local companies and making these part of the multinational system. The turnover of these multinationals was many times more than the GDPs of smaller countries.

However, the end of the last century saw the emergence of Japanese and South Korean conglomerates as a serious threat to US dominance, while the beginning of this century saw the Indians and Chinese turning tables on the world. As a result, the degree to which Washington can slow its decline and preserve its remaining primacy will depend increasingly on its willingness to suppress its unilateralist reflexes and to take account of the perceptions and interests of others in its foreign policy decisions making.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

Indo-US nuclear treaty hangs in the balance?



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

MATTERS AROUND US

It appears that a firm decision on the important but sensitive issue is proving difficult for the Indian government. The bottom line is that the deal seems somewhat uncertain mainly because of Indian domestic politics.

such a situation.

Since the support of the leftists is critically important for the government that falls short of absolute majority in the parliament, Dr. Singh's administration is faced with a difficult situation. On the one hand, it wants to implement the agreement since the government feels that it would benefit India in many ways, while, on the other, the government can not ignore the sensitivities of its supporters while asserting that New Delhi would not roll back from the understanding.

The ruling rainbow coalition has completed three-fourths of its five-year term, with general elections scheduled early next year. It is a minority government relying totally on the outside support of the leftists, who attached no strict conditions to the government for their cooperation.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist), the main leftist force, and its allies are understandably opposed to the US, on ideological lines. They are not supposed to support a close relationship with Washington, but the government of Dr. Manmohan Singh has developed deeper ties with the US.

The civilian atomic cooperation accord is an eyesore for the leftists, and it is no surprise. But the government-leftists differences have undeniably created uncertainty about the future of the accord. Sometime ago it seemed that differences on the

issue would even lead to the collapse of the government, although most analysts believe that things are unlikely to reach such a pass that will warrant a fall of ruling coalition.

The current government is at the helm with the support of the leftists, and in the event of the withdrawal of this crucial support it will collapse as a logical development of the situation.

Following the last general elections, the ruling alliance replaced another coalition government, National Democratic Alliance (NDA), headed by the Bharatiya Janata party (BJP). The UPA has no requisite majority in the house, but it formed the government with the support of the communists, who have 60 members.

Many thought that this outside support would not last long since the leftists do not see eye to eye on many issues with the UPA, even though they have a common approach on the issue of secularism and some other broad matters.

Such assessment had largely been belied since the understanding remained somewhat unhindered although some issues created some misunderstanding between the two in the past, but not to the extent of causing any major problem. Foreign investment, too close relations with the United States, and policies towards agriculture are some of the issues that caused differences.

The much-vaunted nuclear

deal is proving to be a difficult nut, when the leftists are opposing the agreement while the government is keen to implement it.

India has been experiencing coalition culture for sometime past when it comes to governing the country, and it is now almost inconceivable that any single party can form a government. Needless to say, that this pattern of government is getting strengthened in India, and the latest UPA government is no exception. Gone are the days when a single political organisation could muster enough support in the lower house of parliament and stake claim to form a government of its own.

Even the major parties these days seldom dream of having an absolute majority in the 545-member lower house of parliament (Lok Sabha), elected by direct popular votes. They either seek to reach an electoral understanding before the voting or look for like-minded parties to form the government, as an absolute majority is often lacking. The previous NDA government and its successor, the UPA alliance, fit in the same milieu of coalition culture.

The coming together of different political forces, which may be under compulsion or through sheer political understanding, is not unusual in parliamentary democracy. But it has also its pitfalls, particularly when none of the constituents enjoy outright majority by themselves. This is mostly the case in the Indian

political scenario these days.

As such, how long the coalition government can remain in power is always a matter of interest. When the present government took over, it was also a matter of speculation about how long it would last; and such talk has gained ground of late centering on the differences on the nuclear deal.

The Congress President Sonia Gandhi is the head of the UPA alliance as well, and she seems to have spearheaded it fairly well. The government has several heavyweight politicians from various parties, and their ambitions could create problems for the ruling alliance.

The presence of Sharad Pawar of Maharashtra and Laloo Prasad Yadav from Bihar is potentially troublesome, since these senior politicians can have differences over influence and strategy. However, so far, a positive condition persists despite some differences. No doubt this has been possible largely because of the remarkable gesture demonstrated by Congress chief Sonia Gandhi who, in an unprecedented move, refused to become prime minister when the position was on the platter.

It was a reflection of her sagacity, as she had rightly foreseen that the opposition would whip up a campaign on her being a 'foreigner' had she become the prime minister of a large country like India. The Italian-born wife of slain premier Rajiv Gandhi demonstrated wisdom by this decision, which eventually helped the UPA to remain in government for the last four years.

Now, it remains to be seen how she, as the most influential person in the government, deals with the nuclear accord. The present UPA government is faring well without facing any major crisis,

and is set to complete its full term barring unexpected developments.

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates, wrapping up a recent visit to India, clearly indicated that time was running out for the nuclear deal and that the Indian government should push ahead for its implementation. However, he said that the failure to clinch the agreement would not affect the growing New Delhi-Washington defence cooperation, which is very much discernible now.

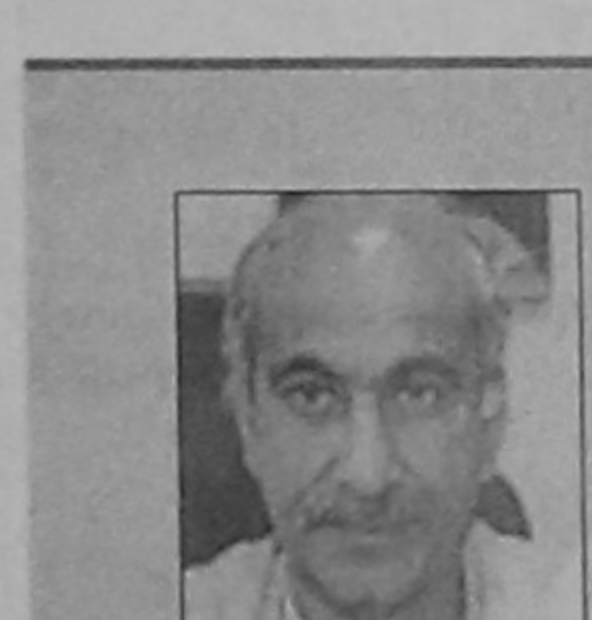
Leftist leaders, particularly the CPM heavyweight Prakash Karat, are known to oppose the accord tooth-and-nail, while some others leaders including from leftists citadel West Bengal blow hot and cold on the issue. Those relatively lenient on the matter feel that withdrawal of support from the government on the nuclear issue would result in the exit of the Manmohan government, and that this would not eventually help the secular forces as the BJP and allies may get an opportunity to stage a come back to power.

Likewise, some leaders in the ruling UPA also feel that too much enthusiasm about the nuclear deal will anger the leftists, and a kind of "go slow" may help the overall interest of the coalition. But many in India favour the deal, and some key figures in the government are keen to go ahead with this regardless of the communist allies' sentiments.

It appears that a firm decision on the important but sensitive issue is proving difficult for the Indian government. The bottom line is that the deal seems somewhat uncertain mainly because of Indian domestic politics.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior journalist and analyst of international affairs.

Double play



M.J. AKBAR

THE Congress election formula is in place. E=M multiplied by C raised to the power of 2. E stands for Elections, M represents Money, public money of course, and C is for Chidambaram, the finance minister who delivers an annual elixir for permanent youth rather than a mere budget, unlike more pedestrian finance ministers.

When Chidambaram throws public money, he does so with a heft and dexterity that would be the envy of champions. Whether he heaves a discus or hurls a javelin, his target is the same; the ballot box.

BYLINE

The prevalent mood of the Indian voter is to reward honesty, and punish corruption and deceit. If the farmer thinks that the loan waiver is an elaborate hoax, the Congress will suffer. All sides will make their cases directly to the voter in rallies. The voice of India will become the noise of India. Peace will return only after the general elections.

He is so delighted with the cheering from government benches during the presentation of the national budget that he has been urging all and sundry to think of a general election as early as in May. He believes that Congress can sweep back to power on a Chidambaram wave.

Actually, he may get his wish, although not quite in the manner he expects, if the Left withdraws support to the UPA government this month over the Indo-US nuclear deal.

Hallucination comes easily to anyone in power, but is there any merit in the Congress presumption that it can pick up the rural vote with this massive loan waiver, and the urban vote with the Indo-US

nuclear deal? Mrs. Shiela Dikshit put the political argument for the nuclear deal forward, chief minister of Delhi, just after Prakash Karat, general secretary of the CPI (M) asked the government for immediate clarification, and set a deadline for March 15. Mrs Dikshit was given this difficult job because she is one of the few Congress leaders who still retain some credibility with voters.

Electoral politics is never an easy partner of credibility, and Mrs. Dikshit's might have suffered a scrape or two when she charged the Marxists with being anti-national Chinese agents who were coming in the way of India's progress. This sort of thing is about four decades too late; it went out of

fashion by 1965.

Marxist leaders (including Jyoti Basu) were detained as potential fifth columnists during the Indo-China war of 1962, but proved, in the very next elections, in 1967, that the people thought them patriotic enough. The Marxists came to power for the first time in Bengal as part of a United Front in 1967.

They are still winning forty years later. The Marxists created history with a sixth straight victory in the Tripura Assembly elections. The Left Front got 49 out of 60 seats, increasing its numbers by eight; the Congress was down to 10, decreasing from 19. The CPM got 46 seats, a majority on its own; its allies got three. The Congress had

done everything it could; it engineered an impression, pushed forward by sections of compliant media, that there was a huge anti-incumbency wave in the state.

The Congress poured money into its campaign, and patched together a cynical and unhealthy alliance with a man who was on every terrorist list not too long ago, Bijoy Hrangkhawl. Mrs Sonia Gandhi raised the pitch with an intemperate speech that indicated what the Congress line on the Left was going to be.

The turnout was extraordinarily heavy; 92% of the voters cast their ballots. This is generally considered bad news for incumbents. The Left stood conventional wisdom on its head. There is no electoral bribe by the Congress that could have changed such a verdict.

Those who believe that they can hustle voters with large lollipops underestimate the maturity of the Indian electorate. The Indian voter can be persuaded with honesty and good governance; he cannot be purchased with handouts or fiscal tricks.

In the last phase of its recent campaign in Gujarat, the Congress

ran up a substantial laundry list of promises, including the offer to waive loans. It made not the slightest difference; the BJP won.

Cabinet ministers like Kamal Nath have publicly voiced their skepticism, and serious economists have questioned the Chidambaram waiver (the details of which, by the way, are still the exclusive property of his intelligence, but will hopefully be made available for public viewing soon).

The Marxists, in the meantime, have decided to withdraw support to the Manmohan Singh government if it does not end all negotiations on the nuclear deal. That is the simple meaning of the formal letter written by CPI General Secretary A.K. Bardhan. The estrangement could develop into divorce even as early as next week.

The Congress has bought time so far by deliberate waffle, but that purchase is now exhausted. The real arguments will begin, before the court of public opinion, after the break.

The Congress cannot pass the budget without support from the Left. If the alliance breaks, the Congress will accuse the Left and

the BJP of sabotaging what it will surely advertise as the greatest gift ever made to farmers in the history of farming. That hoary old cliché, "an unholy conspiracy," will be the centerpiece of every Congress leader's cyclostyled speech.

The Left will respond with its own accusation; the Congress could have easily delayed the deal and pushed through the budget. But since Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi preferred America and George Bush to farmers, they sacrificed the farmers to placate America.

The BJP will watch the fun and talk of Rama Setu bridge.

The Congress is in election gear. It is looking for new allies everywhere, and pushing the patience of even loyalists like Laloo Prasad Yadav. Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee recently wooed Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar with a trip to China. Amend that; he offered an ego trip to China in an effort to create a rift between Nitish Kumar and the BJP in Bihar.

It has also thought up a facile way in which to challenge Mayawati, by throwing up the idea of a Dalit for prime minister after

the next elections. Anil Shastri wrote a piece suggesting this in the official Congress publication, and then prodded journalists to spread the idea through their media. Such semantics will not dent Mayawati's support, which is rock-solid in her community; but they could damage one of the very few clean faces the Congress has, that of Dr. Singh.

Is everything fair in love, war and elections? Not quite. Love is a relationship between two individuals; war is a contest between two armies. The outcome of elections is determined not by the contestants, but by a third force, a massive jury, the electorate. The morality, immorality or amorality of politicians is measured against the values of the voter.

The prevalent mood of the Indian voter is to reward honesty, and punish corruption and deceit. If the farmer thinks that the loan waiver is an elaborate hoax, the Congress will suffer.

All sides will make their cases directly to the voter in rallies. The voice of India will become the noise of India. Peace will return only after the general elections.

M.J. Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.