

Interference in DUTA affairs

The action was inexplicable, abrasive and uncalled for

THE nation has of late been rather surprised at the way the government has interfered in the elections to such independent bodies as the Supreme Court Bar Association and the Dhaka University Teachers' Association. Such action has not gone down well at all and is in glaring contrast with the oft-stated desire of the government to introduce democratic practice and transparency in national affairs. The high-handed manner in which the authorities acted on Wednesday in the matter of the DUTA polls has taken us aback. We believe that the action, at once inexplicable and abrasive, was uncalled for. We will not be surprised if citizens now begin to think that there is today an invidious desire among the powers that be to harass the teaching community. Where politeness in dealing with university teachers should have been the norm, there now seems to be a clear intention to show them disrespect.

That the DUTA polls were to take place has been public knowledge for weeks. In such a situation, for the joint forces to visit the residence of the election commissioner, himself an academic, and ask him to postpone the polls or resign comes as a rude shock to everyone. We can legitimately ask, at this point, why members of the joint forces should be getting involved in university matters and demonstrate the kind of behaviour which has now left everyone outraged, not to say appalled. We do not think that the government should be getting involved in SCBA and DUTA polls. However, if it had any reservations or questions about these elections, it could simply have made contact with the relevant individuals earlier and explained its views. On Wednesday, or even earlier, a dignified dialogue could have been initiated with DUTA. There was absolutely no need to create an atmosphere of intimidation or panic here.

The action taken over the issue of the DUTA elections certainly does not augur well for the country and does little credit to the government. It sends out the disturbing message that the interaction earlier expected between the authorities and the people is not there or the idea is systematically being pushed aside. The government is on record with its stated intention of ensuring an institutionalisation of democracy in the country. What has now happened over the DUTA affair threatens to undermine that possibility. The people of Bangladesh had expected this caretaker government to heal the deep wounds caused at Dhaka University in August last year by reaching out to students and teachers. Regrettably, the DUTA affair only shows up the inability of the powers that be to be the moral force we require to handle such situations. Or is it that they simply do not care?

Indian war veterans

We commend the Army Chief for the initiative

IT was a reunion long overdue. The Indian war veterans of 1971 led by General JFR Jacob, former chief of staff of the eastern command of the Indian army, were in Dhaka to witness our Independence Day programmes in an atmosphere of friendly warmth and bonhomie, which rekindled the glorious memories of the nine month long Liberation War. They shared our moment of joy and pride, in a spirit of renewal after long 37 years. We missed Gen JS Arora, the GOC-in-C of the eastern command, on the occasion who had passed away recently.

Army Chief General Moeen U Ahmed took the commendable initiative of inviting the war veterans to Dhaka. It was thinking out of the box, since no government in the past could perform the simple task of inviting our friends in need to this country. Our image as a nation can only be brightened if we pay due tributes to the men and women who stood by us in the most excruciating days of our history. For the guests, it was an occasion to travel back to the past when they fought shoulder-to-shoulder with us.

Such meetings and reunions do not only revive the memories of the past but will also strengthen the ties between the neighbours. It is more than a question of remembering our friends; we have to make sure that the events of 1971 are not lost into oblivion. Obviously, those who fought for this nation and suffered beyond description would be elated to see the war veterans, the 'living mementoes' of the great war.

The issue of our bilateral relations with India should not be mixed up with our tribute to genuine friends who fought alongside us for our freedom. The contribution of the Indian army in 1971 will always remain a glorious chapter in our freedom struggle. As neighbours we will have contentious issues and sometimes even serious conflictual situations. These, however, must not be confused with the events of 1971. Just as our sense of gratitude should not prevent us from pursuing national interest with vigour, so also present or future problems should not deflect and vitiate the memories of 1971.

We as a nation should take pride in and uphold the historical truths that have shaped our destiny. And this should always be viewed in its own perspective, keeping the present day problems and irritants aside to be resolved through diplomatic efforts.

Take it from Tagore



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IN the Bengali year of 1347, roughly one year before he died, an interview with Rabindranath Tagore was published in the April-May issue of *Shonibar Chithi* (The Saturday Mail). The interview had created quite a stir, as many didn't like what was said. The poet decried the national politics of Bengal, stating that puerile politicians ran it. Then he gave his final blow. He said he was disappointed in the future of the Bengali race.

A lot of what Tagore said in that interview had to do with national character. Sociotics is a science which deals with that subject, and it says that nations are known by integral types, closely related to language and religion. For example, most of Europe is made up of rational integral types. That is why logic or ethics is the leading function of their life. Most of Asia is irrational, because their leading function is sensing or intuition.

The countries where English is a

common language dominate the spheres of science and technology. Their integral type is extraverted logic. Russians belong to greater European rational culture. But they have Asian leanings, which is responsible for their irrational mentality and particular breed of creativity.

Sociotics also goes by religious categories. The Protestant countries have logical integral types, while Catholic cultures are almost always ethical. The Asian religions of Hinduism and Buddhism, unfathomable to the Western mind, are dominant in India and China, where irrationality flourishes. Islam, like most of modern Christianity, is said to be a religion with a rational mindset.

Whether one believes in those classifications or not, what was Tagore thinking? According to sociotics, the integral type for the Bengali Hindus should be irrational

under both geographic and religious categories. The Bengali Muslims should be torn between Asian irrationality and Islamic rationalism. Instead, what Tagore said was a function of gender. He said that the act of building something required male endurance, whereas the Bengalis had the nagging habit of women. They always complained that others had deprived them of what they couldn't learn for themselves.

The most celebrated Bengali poet expressed his disdain for the political leaders of Bengal. The top-class leaders quarreled like low-class women, and busied themselves with divisive actions in the name of high politics. He fumed that the Bengalis were a nation which neither liked to do anything on its own, nor let others do it for themselves. He saw the streaks of destructive tendencies amongst them, and said that it wasn't lack of intelligence

which misguided them. Instead, it was their wicked nature which was the source of their distress.

The poet also said that the Bengalis subverted their own well-being by adopting unfair means, aggravated by selfish intentions and wanton politics. He criticised student politics, and blamed politicians for wasting young minds whose rightful place was in classrooms.

The first Bengali Nobel-laureate cried lie upon himself that he had lived too long to witness this dismal eventuality when the forces of creation were defeated by the forces of destruction. There was no hope for the country, he predicted, because truth could never grow in the dunghill of lies.

When Tagore analysed the Bengali persona, he emphasised on their reckless propensities.

They were adept at wrecking up things. Their minds worked like an

absurd battle plan, he said, where the warriors wanted to fight without slightest concern for discipline. The greatest Bengali poet was dismayed because his people didn't know how to appreciate anything great, large or admirable. Instead, there was this mad rush to sling mud at each other, while straddled across someone's neck. This mindset, he cautioned, wasn't going to bring them any good.

Those were the exact words coming from a man who had spent a lifetime eulogising the Bengali spirit in poems and songs! Yet, he was disenchanted with their politics and gave a concentrated expression of how he was frustrated with the sentiments and emotions of the same people who had inspired his creative juice.

The Bengalis, he said, fought amongst themselves, each against another, relentlessly sharpening their knives to attack anyone who wished to challenge them in their pursuit of selfishness. Those knives, he reminded, were not made of metal, but of slander and hatred.

Then he went to the heart of the problem. In India, the Bengalis were the first to come in contact with the Western culture and education. They outshone rest of India in education and literature, because it required solitary pursuit within the confines of privacy, which was a strong side of the Bengali mind.

But national building was different, said an embittered Tagore. It needed collective work, which is where the

Bengali minds proved inadequate. They united to divide, came together to separate, blaming the disastrous outcome of their own inanities on others.

According to Jean Cocteau, the French film director, the worst tragedy for a poet is to be admired through being misunderstood. Many of us praise Tagore's poetry and swing to his songs, but most of us may not have actually fathomed that he wanted to tell us something more.

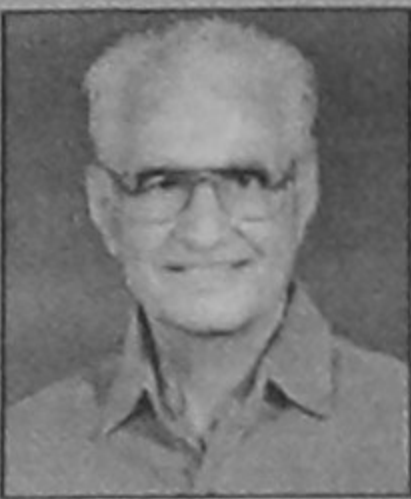
Maybe this is what has saddened him in the end and constrained to give an outburst in The Saturday Mail. He must have sensed that he was going to be extolled by people before they were familiar with his thoughts.

Carl Sandburg, an American poet, highlights that cynicism in his definition of poetry. Poetry, he says, is the opening and closing of a door, leaving those who look through to guess what is seen in the flash of a moment. Tagore has written many songs, short stories, dramas, poems and musical scores, all of which gave us glimpses into the astounding genius of a prolific man. In the penultimate year of his life, this man must have given that interview for a purpose. For one last time he opened the door before it slammed.

Take it from Tagore. He wanted us to look through, and the only Bengali nation that we are, we should.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

A troika rules Pakistan



M.B. NAQVI
writes from Karachi

DESPISE the passing of over a month after the election, Pakistan still does not have a new government(s); the people having spoken, loud and clear, what does this delay signify?

There was much intrigue, only in part secret, emanating from two sources. First, the President House, which was manoeuvring to stay on in power, if possible with the powers he now has, and maybe to create a rift between the two winning parties -- Pakistan People's Party and Nawaz Sharif's PML (N). The two have, however, mustered a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly, and who knows whether the Senate may not soon lose the Musharraf-supporting majority. Vibes are that this might happen soon.

The second source is now all too open. It is the US administration, and western and Nato powers that want to ensure that Musharraf stays with effective powers to lead the new government in the war on terror and they may have persuaded the winners to keep Musharraf in place with enough powers to be able to conduct the war on terror more vigorously.

The choice of new leaders was not in American hands, but they seem to have succeeded in keeping the winners amenable to American advice. The Arab diplomats have dutifully given their bit for the US.

The third decisive force is the Pakistan army. It has ruled Pakistan since 1953; originally its generals strengthened civilian bureaucrats

by the C-in-C becoming defence minister in uniform and enabling the governor general to dismiss the elected Constituent Assembly to prevent it from promulgating the almost complete constitution in 1954. In another four years, that general took over the country as its president and ruled for 10 years.

Another bumbling general, who presided over the country's dismemberment, succeeded him. Against that backdrop, other generals put Z.A. Bhutto in power. Bhutto helped the army regain its morale through expansion, and better pay and perks.

He was rewarded for his pains with being overthrown and later hanged. General Zia went on to rule for another 10 years, and perfected the military's alliance with both Americans and mullahs, enabling the US to win the cold war in Afghanistan.

The poor and downtrodden people of Pakistan are not even a fourth force in governance process. Maybe things will now change. Thanks to developments in 2007, with many crises bursting upon the country, and the army withdrawing support, the otherwise "manageable" elections, originally due in November last year, became unmanageable.

The year saw further rise of militant Islam, brought into most homes by the electronic media. The highlights of the year, other than the two ongoing insurgencies, were spectacular: the Lal Masjid affair polarising Pakistan society between supporters of militant Islam and the modern and moderate one.

PLAIN WORDS

The current crisis is over a discredited dictator, who remains on the throne protected by security agencies; who held an election, that was reasonably free, under world pressure; and the people gave a clear verdict against him. But the US wants Musharraf to stay, democracy or no democracy; they are behaving as if they own Pakistan, and are forcing the parties to keep Musharraf as the leader to fight

There were also the gaucheries of Gen. Musharraf vis-à-vis the chief justice of Pakistan during 2007. First was the hand-handed attempt to sack him by a phalanx of generals demanding his resignation. He refused, and that simple action made him the symbol of Pakistani people's support for an independent judiciary, and their resistance against Pakistan's military. The attempt backfired.

The reason why Musharraf wanted to sack Mr. Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry was that he was asserting himself against an arrogant executive that habitually transgressed the laws; he was harsh on senior bureaucrats over the hundreds, maybe thousands, of "disappearances" of those who either supported the Baloch nationalists' war against Islamabad's army or were political opponents.

The civil bureaucrats always held that they knew nothing about the whereabouts of the disappeared; top military officials were reluctant to face the CJP in court. He also prevented fishy sellouts of public undertakings. He was perceived as a thorn in the side of Musharraf and the bureaucracy; hence, the decision to throw him out. Overnight, he ignited the prairie fire of the lawyers' movement, now being supported by all sections of intelligentsia in the media, academia and NGOs.

The lawyers' movement has made the going rough for Musharraf, and "go Musharrafago" is a popular outcry. It first forced the Supreme Court to reinstate the CJP and fine the government Rs. One lakh for submitting bogus and

scandalous evidence. The lawyers' movement is demanding Musharraf's ouster. Several cases were filed in the SC about Musharraf's eligibility to fight the election on October 6. Musharraf's contesting presidential election in October was a constitutional violation.

He got himself elected by an Electoral College that had elected him first in 2002; that body was about to die along the national assembly and other assemblies. Which is why many writs landed in SC and it can, in many cases, disqualify Musharraf for having been ineligible to contest the October election, if the original SC is restored.

That made Musharraf take preemptive action: he proclaimed a State of Emergency as the army chief (a wholly unconstitutional act), gave a second Provisional Constitution Order that gave the president (himself) extraordinary powers to amend the Constitution at his discretion. And he did, in effect sacking all the troublesome superior judges in the High and Supreme Courts by forcing them to take a fresh oath of allegiance to the amended Constitution.

For good measure, he locked up sixty superior judges in their homes and reconstituted the High and Supreme Courts with pliant judges who have duly done everything Musharraf wanted.

All this has enraged the people. The so-called establishment, often referred to as the invisible or permanent government of Pakistan, is the enemy. This establishment, how-

ever, has the support of all the social and economic elites, including the bureaucracy and top generals. This establishment has manipulated all governments after 1953.

The only exception could have been the six years (1971 to 1977) of Z.A. Bhutto, because the establishment had been discredited for losing the war and dismembering the country, but were not. He chose to rule as an autocrat with the help of the bureaucracy and the military rather than relying on his own party or the popular support that he did command. The military, once it had recovered, deposed and hanged him.

The next general ruled for 11 years, and his rule was a maleable tool in American hands just as earlier regimes were subject to American advice, and Zia perfected the military-mullah alliance and yoked it to US purposes. Zia should be given full marks for fathering the Islamic jihadists who defeated the Soviets in Afghanistan in 1980s. The demonic force that jihadists and Taliban have become is the product of the CIA, ISI, and their other western sisters.

Much of the subsequent action, like jihad in Kashmir, took place during civilian governments in the 1990s. These governments lived on the sufferance of the army chief who made the door of Prime Minister House a revolving one: five prime ministers were marched in and out between 1988 and 1999.

Nominally, they were dismissed by the president with his sword of the Constitution's Article 58 (2) (b). But civilian presidents were non-entities with no personal constituency, and could never refuse the army chief's wishes; that sword was used at the discretion of the army chief, making so-called Pakistani democracy look ridiculous.

After 1999, Gen. Musharraf has ruled as President through bogus elections. He is clearly seen as America's man, who upturned Pakistan's Afghan policy on a single telephone call from Washington. He

is still a tight buddy of President George Bush, and has been fighting Taliban enthusiastically with a strategy that most Pakistanis regard as unsuitable.

Militant Islam represented by Taliban, al-Qaeda and a myriad of militant groups, is now gradually spreading over most of Pakistan; it cannot be fought mainly militarily.

Pakistan stood perilously on the brink of being swept off by obscurant and intolerant mullahs into establishing a religious Caliphate, with such mullahs acting as a clergy without discipline. But the February election has provided a breather. It is Pakistan's problem that has to be fought by enlightened Pakistanis. America has no locus standi to suggest how Pakistanis will hopefully devise a proper strategy soon for fighting the menace.

The Americans are mainly trigger-happy, and rely on superior firepower or intelligence that has proven grossly inaccurate umpteen times. They have not heard of the simple fact that there is no gun that can kill an idea. To fight an idea, you have to produce other ideas, reason it out, and remain content with simple non-manipulative democracy.

The current crisis is over a discredited dictator, who remains on the throne protected by security agencies; who held an election, that was reasonably free, under world pressure; and the people gave a clear verdict against him. But the US wants Musharraf to stay, democracy or no democracy; they are behaving as if they own Pakistan, and are forcing the parties to keep Musharraf as the leader to fight the war on terror under him.

The winning parties are being coy: most leaders seem to accept American overlordship though they are trying to turn and twist to also clip the powers of Musharraf. They would dearly like to send Mr. Musharraf home. Can they, or would they?

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Hillary's economic Hail Mary

What kind of bailout will Clinton propose to satisfy the markets? Sperling won't say what else she has in mind, but he is quick to argue that she has been way ahead of the curve--as any good president needs to be on the economy. "She gave her first big talk a year ago when she said we have to start upgrading the capacity of the Federal Housing Administration" to issue more mortgages at better rates to stressed homeowners, and provide a timeout on foreclosures.

MICHAEL HIRSH

HELLO, Hillary? Hate to wake you, but it's 3 o'clock in the morning, and we have a real crisis. It's your campaign, senator. It's Hail Mary time. You've lost the bid for a revote in Florida and, it seems, in Michigan, which means your prospects for prevailing over Barack Obama in the primary popular vote by June are vanishing fast.

The Illinois senator, meanwhile, has just delivered a JFK-like speech on race in America -- a savvy move that may well have stanchied the haemorrhaging of his campaign over the controversial remarks made by his pastor, Jeremiah

Wright. The mood could be shifting back in his direction.

So it's a moment for miracles. And there's really only one thing Hillary Clinton can do, perhaps, to pull one off. That is to play to her greatest strength -- her Clintonian credibility on the economy. The economy, after all, was her husband Bill's pride and joy during his eight years in office, it is probably her own area of greatest expertise, and now it is the issue of greatest concern to voters.

Not surprisingly, the Clinton campaign has spent the last several days discussing how to handle the financial crisis that KO'd Bear Stearns and has dominated the headlines this week. "We're quite

concerned that more action is needed. And we're spending a lot of time with large numbers of experts on what's the best framework" for the relief plan, Gene Sperling, her chief economic adviser, told me.

Those experts -- led by Sperling, former Treasury secretary Robert Rubin, former House majority leader Dick Gephardt, former chairwoman of the Council of Economic Advisors Laura Tyson and former deputy secretary of the Treasury Roger Altman -- came up with a new \$30 billion emergency fund to help states buy foreclosed properties and provide mortgage restructuring. "There will be more in the weeks to come," Sperling said.

The markets have stabilised since

the big Fed rescue, but many economists believe there's worse down the road. "This is going to end up in Congress's and the president's lap. It's not going to wait until the next administration," says Harvard's Kenneth Rogoff, the former chief economist of the International Monetary Fund.

Rogoff predicts another big fallout from the devastation caused by failing sub-prime loans and mortgage-backed securities. "Home prices are continuing to fall. The credit markets are still stressed. This is a multi-trillion-dollar problem. It's beyond the Fed's balance sheet to handle it," Rogoff says the relative calm in the markets over the past few days is hardly reassuring. "Each time the Fed has done a dramatic move there's been a plateau," he says. "This time the markets are rightly pricing in a giant bailout." The Clinton campaign echoed him, saying Congress's recent \$168 billion stimulus package did not go far enough.

What kind of bailout will Clinton propose to satisfy the markets?

Sperling won't say what else she has in mind, but he is quick to argue that she has been way ahead of the curve--as any good president needs to be on the economy. "She gave her first big talk a year ago when she said we have to start upgrading the capacity of the Federal Housing Administration" to issue more mortgages at better rates to stressed homeowners, and provide a timeout on foreclosures. Sperling adds: "It didn't hurt our case that we called for a \$30 billion emergency fund [earlier] and that was the exact amount of the loan guarantee offered to JPMorgan to buy Bear Stearns."

Sperling didn't claim that Clinton's record as First Lady gave her any familiarity with financial crises (thank heaven!), but he said that her nearly eight years as a New York senator -- with Wall Street as part of her bailiwick -- has given her a deeper understanding of the current problem. "I encourage you to go back and look at the last year, at which candidate has been the most out in front and aggressive in recognising the magnitude of the chal-

lenge," he says.

And Hillary, like all those associated with the Clinton administration, learned at the knee of former Treasury secretary Robert Rubin, who was renowned for his deft hand in a crisis. "To me, this reinforces what Rubin told all of us in the beginning of '93, that there's no silver bullet to confidence" in the markets, says Sperling. "It's cumulative. And you build or lose over time. She believes that the lack of attention to the fiscal situation, the sense that the president was out of touch, the overly passive view toward the abundant warning signals of a housing crisis and the increased sense of risk are not a recipe that breeds confidence."

Both Clinton and Obama--whose economic adviser has called for getting control of the oil markets--want to distinguish themselves from GOP contender John McCain, who by his own admission doesn't count the economy as one of his strengths and who is taking a more laid-back approach to the current crisis.



"He's not favoured a major bailout so far," McCain's economic adviser, Douglas Holtz-Eakin, told me this week. "We're certainly watching it. If you are in the business of making something, like tires or Caterpillar tractors, things are tough, but you're hanging in there at the moment. If you're in the business of financing stuff, it's a disaster area. The question is, will the problems in the latter area spill over and

damage the former? The researchers are looking back at whether economy has actually contracted. Most people [are] saying no."

What has unquestionably contracted is Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign. And Wall Street may have just given her an opportunity for a stimulus.

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