

Pakistan at a historic crossroads

The challenge she faces is also an opportunity for her

THIS is perhaps for the first time in Pakistan's troubled history that she is going through challenging moments of extreme danger as well as genuine opportunity to emerge as an arbiter of its own destiny solely based on the long cherished aspirations of her people. The new Pakistan prime minister Yusuf Raza Gilani heading a coalition government of Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Muslim League (Nawaz) has taken a clear direction for change setting the tone and tenor of his government at the earliest opportunity.

His annulment of the detention of former chief justice Iftikhar Ahmed Choudhury along with other judges flies directly in the face of President Pervez Musharraf. To President Bush's telephonic greetings to Gilani on his assumption of premiership, he sounded sagacious saying that a comprehensive strategy combining political approach with development programmes is required to fight terrorism.

Similar sentiments were expressed by the incumbent prime minister and his ally Nawaz Sharif in their meetings with visiting US deputy secretary of state John Negroponte and assistant secretary of state Richard Boucher. The present Pakistani leaders have given them to understand that it is the national parliament that would decide on the anti-terror agenda, in what promises to be a sea-change from one-man strategy applied so far.

Not even an incurable optimist could visualise before the election such hopeful signs of democratic assertion reflective of the strength of popular verdict in favour of change would emerge. Pakistan's leadership is faced with the challenge of building internal democracy as well as the task of getting the people behind the fight against terrorism. The first requires the military defending the constitution in making democracy as government of the people, by the people and for the people work; and the second needs popular governance securing the cooperation of the people in the fight against terrorism.

It is for all practical purposes Pakistan's fight. Anti-terrorism agenda shouldn't be pushed down the throat of the Pakistanis by the USA. It must have to be formulated, owned and operated by Pakistan itself. Over and over again it has been proven that an elected political government and not dikrat by any despotic ruler is best suited to fight terrorism.

We in the region take heart from the change of outlook in Pakistan's politics and wish the country and its people all the best in their journey towards democratic consolidation and advancement duly underpinned by containment of Islamic militancy.

Highway police in name only

Mounting insecurity on inter-district roads

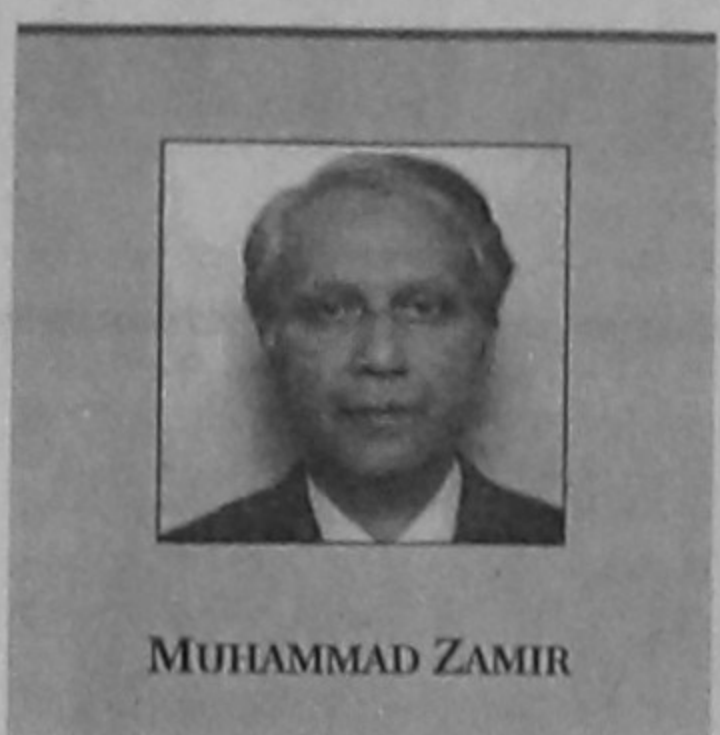
OUR highway networks, substantial as these are, have regrettably become not just accident-prone but also scenes of crime of different types, more perhaps at night than at day time. Ranging from traffic violations of overloading, speeding, overtaking and scuffles over fares through accidents and post-accident violence including clashes between transport operators and police, students and police and factory workers and police, nearly every kind of untoward incident happens on arterial network. The list of troubles is only growing with highway robbery, snatching, cheating by application of deadly potion, carriage of contrabands including purveying of small arms.

The high incidence of accidents, violence and crime on the highways is attributable to virtually dysfunctional highway police squad. Even though we were late in forming a highway police unit as a country: only three years ago we did so, what is still more regrettable is that it remains heavily hemmed in by constraints even to this day. It's a sorry state of affairs with a priority agenda that is inextricably linked to the broader issue of crime control.

Like all good ideas this was started with fanfare and now it is whimpering. In the absence of its distinct and defined status, delegation of financial authority, organogram and rules and regulations, it's an entity long on hopes but short on achievements -- thanks to the lack of coordination between and indifference of establishment and home ministries. It is dependent on district police authorities for money to fuel and repair its transports. The height of its marginalisation can be gauged from the fact that high performance Nissan Patrol jeeps which were provided to the force had been taken away by the top police officials. It was supposed to have 24 highway police stations and 48 police outposts under a single command. But on the ground there are apologies of stations and outposts, let alone full complement of accommodation facilities, equipment, gadgets and transports.

We urge the government to look into their problems and put in place effective policing on the highways.

Strategic implications of water availability



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

I was going through a book the other day that deals specially with the potential global crisis related to the problem of right to water, the commodity which is as precious as clean air. The book, entitled 'Blue Covenant' is written by Maude Barlow, the national chairperson of the Council of Canadians, chairperson of Food and Water Watch in the US and co-founder of the Blue Planet Project, which is instrumental in the international community in working for the right to water for all people.

A water activist, I found some of her assumptions interesting.

We all know that sharing and management of water resources that we face today includes some serious and complex issues. This in turn, has given rise to crises, which, unless tackled with care, can lead to instability and conflict.

Certain areas of the world are faced today not only with dwindling freshwater supplies and inequitable access but also with a growing corporate control of water sources. Juxtaposed, they are emerging as serious strategic threats to sustainable development as well as to survival. This brew is also being further compounded through climate change from fossil fuel emissions and conflicting greed for freshwater -- between nations, rich and poor, public and private interest, rural and urban populations and the competing needs of the natural world as opposed to the industrialised economies.

It is generally agreed that around

the world, there are about 215 major rivers and 300 groundwater basins and aquifers shared by two or more countries. This factor has led to continuous debate over ownership and management. Growing shortages and unequal distribution of water have caused disagreements, sometimes violent, and these have evolved into security risks. This has resulted in politicians like Britain's former defense secretary, John Reid, warning of coming "water wars."

The serious question of division of water flowing down the Ganges from India into Bangladesh. Unilateral withdrawal of water in the upper reaches of the Ganges by several Indian States has reduced supply at the entry point near the Bangladesh border. This has affected agriculture through irrigation and also greatly increased salinity through seepage in Bangladesh's southwestern coastal areas and northwestern regions. It has also impacted on the environ-

activists are expressing concern over the continuing pollution and the future of the Great Lakes. They are also pointing out that the water table of the immediate surrounding areas is steadily falling due to soaring demand created by trial needs. Politics has also been introduced into the scenario and the United States and Canada are beginning to test each other as to the whole philosophical point of joint ownership of the lake waters.

Other factors have crept in.

Attention is now also being given to protection of waterways and drinking water supplies. It is now realized that water is a vital commodity that is closely associated with economic development. Consequently, most developed countries are taking special measures to secure their water infrastructure. In the case of USA, the Department of Homeland Security (allocated \$548 million in appropriations for this purpose) is taking

canals, managing and treating water for reuse and desalinating brackish and sea water for use in the coastal areas. If need be, this could be undertaken through a public and private partnership, with private sector providing the necessary technology and funding support. Management of such enterprises could also be through public and private joint endeavour.

Time has come for Bangladesh to understand that it is in our national interest to view water as the most important factor for our future stability, security and economic development. We have to learn to link our water security with our national security. We have to start developing the technology necessary to find solutions. We, a densely populated country with little natural resource, must start taking water security more seriously. Perspective planning in this sector has to be broader, more comprehensive and more integrated.

In this context it would be important for all countries in South Asia to treat this issue as a common end and not confine in bilateral connotations. We have more water than we can handle during the monsoons and the ensuing floods. At other times we have massive draughts that affect agriculture, the environment as well as economic opportunities. To that has been added the threat of arsenic poisoning. This uncertainty has been made further complex through climate variability.

What is needed now is political will based on the understanding that water, particularly clean water, is a fundamental human right for all citizens of the world including South Asia. We have to create the conditions for a concerted and collective regional collaboration based on the principles of water conservation and equity in terms of management and usage.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador who can be reached at mzamir@dhaka.net

POST BREAKFAST

Time has come for Bangladesh to understand that it is in our national interest to view water as the most important factor for our future stability, security and economic development. We have to learn to link our water security with our national security. We have to start developing the technology necessary to find solutions. We, a densely populated country with little natural resource, must start taking water security more seriously. Perspective planning in this sector has to be broader, more comprehensive and more integrated.

Climatologists have also predicted that violence and political conflict might become more likely as watersheds turn to deserts, glaciers melt and water supplies are polluted. Such a crisis is already being played out on a tragic scale in Darfur.

Potential conflict areas have also been identified in other areas of the Middle East in Israel, Jordan and Palestine. All of them rely on the Jordan River, which is controlled by Israel, Turkey and Syria. The sensitivity of the situation is compounded by the fact that Turkey plans to build dams on the Euphrates River, which quite naturally is being objected to by co-riparian Syria.

China and India have problems with the Brahmapara River. The same river has also been the cause of tension between Bangladesh, a lower riparian and India. Consequently, China's proposal to divert the river is being carefully watched and monitored by both India and Bangladesh. There is also

ment and potential for livelihood of the inhabitants of these regions. Increase in rural unemployment has in turn led to large migration of millions into urban areas, taxing its existing poor infrastructure (housing, availability of pure drinking water and sanitation).

Divisions have similarly surfaced between Angola, Botswana and Namibia, over the Okavango water basin. The dispute has exacerbated because of Namibia proposing to build a three hundred-kilometre pipeline that will drain the delta. This is not acceptable to the other countries. Tension is also slowly increasing between Ethiopia and Egypt over division of water flowing down the Nile. In both countries there has been a spurt in population growth and this has created greater need for water, particularly for irrigation.

Such stress is however not just limited to Asia and Africa. It is evident also along the US-Canadian border over shared boundary waters. Environmental

This has in fact led to governors of the American states bordering the Great Lakes, passing an amendment to the treaty governing the lakes that allows for water diversions to new communities off the basin on the American side. Canadian protests in this regard have fallen on deaf ears in Washington.

Similar trouble is also brewing on the US-Mexican border, where a private group of US based water rights holders is using the North American Free Trade Agreement to challenge the long-term practice by Mexican farmers to divert water from the Rio Grande before it reaches the United States.

One could sum it all up by saying that a complex issue is becoming even more intricate and sensitive.

Water, as is clear from the preceding paragraphs, has become a key strategic security and foreign policy priority for most countries of the world. It is not just availability of water as a resource or as a source

the necessary steps. The US Environmental Protection Agency has also created a National Homeland Security Research Centre to develop the scientific foundations and tools to be used in the event of an attack on the nation's water systems, and a Water Security Division has been established to train water utility personnel on security issues. Such interest in water by the USA and other developed countries has underlined one aspect very clearly -- water security is destined to become a national and global priority in the decades ahead.

There is a lesson here for all developing countries including Bangladesh.

Our policy planners also need to address water security issues with utmost seriousness. Efforts and perspective planning in this regard should include finding the necessary energy to extract water from underground aquifers, transporting water through pipelines and

Our parliament and parliamentarians

ABDUR RAQUIB KHANDAKER

IN Bangladesh political process seems to have gone aground. Besides politicians, some people from other walks of life have been deliberating on the issue of electoral reforms to suit a system of democracy that the country would like to practice. So far little progress appears to have been made. The Election Commission, on the other hand is organising to have dialogues with some of the political parties on certain issues which have not been clearly spelled out. There appears to be a lack of courage of conviction.

The problems that we could experience in the immediate past were that of mistrust, jealousy and intolerance between the political parties. As a manifestation of these we saw the parliament sessions were boycotted for days and months together by the opposition parties on the plea of inequitable allocation of time by the speaker who according to our parliamentary practice belongs to the party in power. Taking advantage of such absence, the government party enjoyed and exercised absolute power. Lord Acton, a historian and a moralist, said 'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely'. As a result corruption pervaded all walks of life. Many of our politicians who were expected to set up examples for others themselves became champions in the art of corrupt practices. An unholy race, for amassing property beyond one's known source of income began in different classes of social constituents. In the wake of these events the people in general suffered economically, quality of development work suffered and the country became ill famed internationally. Some of the country directors of different donor agencies often got opportunity to meddle into the internal affairs of this country. It is regrettable

Every elected M.P. must have an office within his constituency and be available to his constituents to listen to their grievances. The MP should have sanction of a budget enabling him to discharge his responsibility and to redress the usual complaint that they see their MPs only once when they come to seek vote prior to polls. As we follow the Westminster system of democracy we may look at some of their parliamentary practices as well. Like the United Kingdom Parliament we should have a code of conduct rules for members of the parliament.

ble that the country which won its freedom by shedding so much blood has lost its self respect so soon.

There was a suggestion from some quarter of having our "own brand of democracy". Democracy, however, does not preclude the influence of social circumstances and local culture. Not too long ago, Amr Musa, Secretary General, of the Arab League, made an assertion before invasion of Iraq by US that western democracy could not be imported on the wings of F16 and planted on the soil of the Middle East. As the social system in the Middle East was tribal there was an element of substance in that assertion. The instant suggestion was probably made in that sense. It is, however, too early to try any innovation in our country. We have a constitution which advocates adult franchise, and any amendment thereto requires the parliament. Changes to our democratic practice will, however, evolve in due course with the passage of time. Here we may perhaps refer to the constitution of England which is mostly un-written and dependent on traditions and customs, which developed over time.

One group of aspirants, to make the matter more confusing, is talking about formation of a national government. When the nation is preparing to have a general election, to think of a national government at this juncture, is like pouring cold water on whatever little achievement the caretaker government has so far made. One may even frown at the very motive

of such a proposal. When the country has already got a constitution, how can an idea of a national government creep in which is rather extra constitutional. The country had already suffered a decade of instability and unfortunate episodes. It has come to face the present crisis due to transgression of a few political leaders. It is high time they should come to sense and let the people have some respite.

There is no alternative to democracy. Although M. Faguet, a French academician, a well known exponent of democracy himself, said that democracy is a 'cult of incompetence' but it is the only system which provides for a peaceful transfer of power, therefore, preferable. There is, however, more opportunity for corruption in a democracy in the context of prevalent economic management. Corruption as such has become an international phenomenon. In a democratic government, therefore, the anticorruption machinery has to be efficient, vigilant and active and a constant corollary to the government to keep corruption under control as well as to keep corrupt people under threat. The government has to devise various administrative measures as contrivances to reduce the opportunities of practicing corruption.

Coming back to the question of 'dialogue' between the political parties and the Election Commission, the matter is not understandable to an ordinary citizen. It seems logical that the Commission frames some rules

and sets some procedures under the Election Laws as per the provisions of the constitution and declares the election schedule and invites the political parties or individuals to contest in the election. The Election Commission has no obligation to discuss anything with the political parties. Both sides have to adhere to the constitutional provisions, rules and procedures.

Above every thing else a will to have a peaceful election must be there and cordial relations among the candidates and their parties need be reestablished. During long training under the local self government introduced by the British with the India Act of 1935 in this sub-continent the people had shown enough progress in that respect. People even at the Union level had acquired the decency of democratic practices. These tools of democracy can be seen in our neighbouring country and Bengal's traditions then were ahead of others. The present deterioration has possibly taken place because of the fact that people without any political training and background have entered the field of politics and many have taken politics as a profession. In erstwhile Pakistan and subsequently in Bangladesh prolonged Martial Law kept political activists or democratic practice at bay. People seem to have forgotten the art of required democratic spirit to make politics free from intolerance, jealousy and animosity.

If the goal of politics is to go into power to serve the people and not

self aggrandizement, it should be possible to acquire the desired virtues. Political activists must be disciplined to follow certain norms. The parliament should be the centre of political activities and street agitation must be reduced and made peaceful. Haral of the type being practiced now a days must be banned by law. A new type of political leadership will have to grow in achieving this goal. People often talk of new leadership to take over. But it is to be borne in mind that only young leadership won't carry us anywhere. What is required is an admixture of old and new politicians. The old, barring the corrupt ones, will lend sobriety and experience and the young will bring in ideas.

It is, however, acceptable to all, that a candidate to be eligible for election as a member of the National Assembly must conform to the provisions of Article 66 of the Constitution. Besides, it is necessary to arrive at a consensus on the following issues:

- Freedom of holding a different personal opinion on any issue by a member than that of his party must be permissible and to that effect Article 67 of the constitution will have to be amended. This is in consonance with the spirit of democracy.
- No member shall be entitled to remain absent for more than fourteen days without prior intimation to the Hon'ble Speaker on reasonable ground for his or her absence such as physical ailments, unavoidable social or family engagements

etc. A member of the parliament remaining absent beyond that limit must not be allowed to draw his allowance for that period.

- There should be a reasonable limit of election expenditure and some ceiling on entitlement of telephone charges, energy bills, etc.
- No candidate should be allowed to contest from more than two constituencies, of which one should be his home constituency
- A candidate must be a voter, preferably, of his own constituency. A democratically elected member of the parliament must be acquainted with people and the problems of his constituency to make his representation purposeful.

Every elected M.P. must have an office within his constituency and be available to his constituents to listen to their grievances. The MP should have sanction of a budget enabling him to discharge his responsibility and to redress the usual complaint that they see their MPs only once when they come to seek vote prior to polls.

As we follow the Westminster system of democracy we may look at some of their parliamentary practices as well. Like the United Kingdom Parliament we should have a code of conduct rules for members of the parliament.

In short members of the parliament must be trustworthy, have integrity, and shall base their conduct on a consideration of the public interest. It is hoped that our future parliamentarians will do whatever needful to chart a course for sustaining democracy in turning Bangladesh into a prosperous modern state.

Abdur Raquib Khandaker is a former IGP and a former member of Crime Prevention and Control Committee, UN.

OPINION

How long a populated area can remain water-logged?

ALI IDRIS

BHOBODOHO is a small place in Jessore, accommodating ing of about 8,000 families. It was fertile like many other places of Bangladesh even a few years back. It had been yielding three crops of paddy a year, various vegetables during winter, fruits like mangoes, berries, jack-fruits during summer. The place used to be crowded with school-going children, market-going peasants, mosque and temple-bound worshippers. But currently the situation has reversed. Having been water-logged almost throughout the year

, no crops are harvested, no fruits, vegetables or even grass for cattle feeding are grown. Consequently there is every day shortage of food. The area used to grow Tk 80 crore worth of agricultural produce, this has dropped down awfully. Most of the dwellings being submerged by water, cooking food and eating it, collecting pure drinking water, washing clothes, taking bath etc have become difficult and unhygienic. Sanitation system has broken down completely.

The news of this water-logging has been telecast several times. Renowned media personality Sykhe Siraj has filmed and tele-

cast the situation in Channel-I more than once. Many columnists have written about the matter in the print media, but unfortunately neither the government nor any NGO, or any other organization has come up to the rescue of the people.

Reasons for water logging

Talking to an executive of Bangladesh Water Development Board it is learnt that the river-beds of the area have become filled up with silt. So the water cannot flow easily downstream to the sea. Moreover when sea water level rises up during high tide the flow stands still. Any rainfall at that time

aggravates the stagnant situation and the water of the rivers overflows their banks and spreads to the low lying areas. The water that submerges the low lying areas cannot revert to the river when flood subsides. That is how water logging is created. As a remedy the Water Board has been making tidal basins in order to raise the level of surface of those areas.

The mechanism of making tidal basin is to close an area with earthen embankments and connect it with the river by excavating a canal. During high tide the water from river enters the basin carrying a lot of silt which is retained, thus gradually the low

place becoming high in several years and water logging is cured. While this method was going on, the owners of land refused to leave their land idle, without crops for several years. They claimed some compensation which the government could not afford. So the process stopped.

The second method undertaken by the BIWTA involves dredging of the river-beds. This method is effective, but the quantity of work done is very little allegedly because of low budgetary allocation by the government.

Suggested measures

It is really unfortunate for 8,000

families at Bhubodoho whose land, dwelling houses, markets, roads, schools, colleges, madrasahs etc remain submerged throughout the year and no effective remedial measures are taken by the authority. BIWTA cannot escape responsibility by saying that there is no budget allocation for dredging the river-beds. It should rather bring the sufferings of the people to the notice of the authority recommending allocation of funds for dredging. The allocated funds should also be spent very prudently without any pilferage and graft. The government should allocate more funds for this project for dredging or

excavating the river beds manually through food for work programme.

Secondly, there are many NGOs and donors who donate for the humanitarian causes. I am appealing to them to come with funds for removing this water logging.

Thirdly, tidal basins programme should not be stopped. The government should pay some sort of compensation to the owners of land and the peasants and workers who earn their livelihood by working in those lands. The government should make allocations in the ADP for solving this problem.

Fourthly, the dwellers of Bhubodoho should come up with their voluntary assistance to excavate the river beds along with dredging of BIWTA, food for work programme and tidal basins programme of Water Board. All the efforts put together will, I firmly believe solve the water logging problem of Bhubodoho for ever. What is needed is an effort for the local leaders, Water Board and BIWTA authorities to motivate the people to extend their self help and activate the govt measures.

Ali Idris FCA is a finance executive.