

## Politicians' responses to CA's address

Nation's priority is a free and fair election

THE major political parties appear to be unhappy with the contents of the recent address by the Chief Adviser. There have even been hints from some politicians that they might boycott the planned dialogue beginning May 22. In other words, the underlying tone of the parties' reaction is one of rejection. We understand their concerns, but as we have already noted, there are both positives and negatives in the CA's address and things should move along keeping such considerations in mind.

As far as the parties' responses to the CA's ideas are concerned, experience tells us that there has traditionally been a gap between posturing and actual action where handling important national issues by the parties is concerned. We hope that in the present circumstances the reaction from the parties is no more than an attempt to extract political mileage out of the situation as they prepare to discuss the election-related realities immediately ahead. Posturing in politics has certainly its own advantages. But beyond that, the more important matter is for the parties to assess the realities and arrive at a point where they will be seen to be upholding broad national interests. And they can do that by taking part in the forthcoming dialogue with the government. There are a couple of reasons why their participation in the dialogue becomes a necessity. First, the nation clearly is raring to go through free, fair and transparent elections; and, second, those elections must be held within the time frame, namely, December of this year.

It must be borne in mind that a rejection of the dialogue by the parties, particularly the major players in the league, will jeopardise the prospects for a speedy return to democracy. That obviously cannot be of benefit either to the political classes or, more significantly, to the nation. Therefore, we think that if the goal of the parties is a holding of elections, any and all obstacles in the way of a return to elected government must be overcome. That the major parties are now demanding the release of their leaders as a precondition to their participation in the dialogue is understandable. But let that not be the sole demand, for there are other issues as well the country needs to deal with and tide over. Against such a reality, we hope the parties will do their homework and ready themselves for the upcoming dialogue with the government. The points the CA raised in his speech -- doing away with black money and hartals, making parliament the centre of all issues, et al -- have a relevance that no one can ignore or deny. It is on these issues that the parties should come forth to provide a sense of future direction to the nation. They can do that job by including in their talking points all the ingredients that can strengthen democracy, ensure a corruption-free society and, overall, guarantee an economically secure Bangladesh.

Let partisan posturing not derail the planned dialogue. And let national interests override all other considerations.

## Coalition experiment in Pakistan in doldrums

The partners must show sagacity to stay together

THE decision of Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) to withdraw their nine ministers from the PPP-led coalition government, barely six weeks old, is a major setback to the process of restoration and consolidation of democracy in the country.

The ministers quit following the government's failure to meet the deadline on how and when to reinstate the judges dismissed by President Musharraf. The issue is far from being simple, as the PML-N and the PPP are viewing it, for obvious reasons, from different angles. While the PML-N wants to go ahead with the judges' reinstatement, if only because it would be a major embarrassment to President Musharraf, the PPP has its own calculations based on the premise that its co-chairman Asif Ali Zardari himself is believed to have been a beneficiary of the Judges' dismissals.

However, what the two parties might be overlooking is the fact that consolidation of the democratic process is far more important than scoring points through tough bargaining on a specific issue. The democratic process, which at one stage looked like drifting, could be set on course only when the political forces took a united stand against Musharraf. Now, the resignations, a sure sign of a crack in the coalition government, might give the embattled president a chance to reassert himself as the arbiter of the country's political destiny -- a position he so steadfastly stuck to since 1999. This is the kind of an opportunity that Musharraf might just have been waiting for.

When elections were held in Pakistan, we thought politicians had succeeded in proving the popular apprehensions wrong as they sailed through the electoral process rather smoothly. It looked like a truly fresh beginning for democracy in Pakistan with President Musharraf finally appearing to be exhausted, after all his attempts to maintain the status quo failed.

To reap the benefits of what they achieved through the last general elections, the politicians have to demonstrate both maturity and political acumen, never losing sight of the strong adversary that they are still up against. Nawaz Sharif has said his party would continue to support the government, but that may not be enough to keep the brittle coalition together. The PPP, for its part, should see beyond its own expediencies and play a positive role in reversing the wrongs committed during Musharraf's rule.

## How to solve the rice crisis

In addition to maintaining buffer stocks, the government has to keep the price of rice low to make it affordable for the poor, and provide incentive to farmers to grow more rice. It is widely accepted that developing countries cannot achieve both objectives unless they have inexhaustible resources. They have to prioritise one of them without undermining the other. Bangladesh has to make a hard choice at a time when subsidies in agriculture are rising very rapidly.

SUBSH DASGUPTA

THE policy followed by all governments of Bangladesh to maintain a balance between rice producers and consumers need to be critically reviewed at a time when both rice price and stock are in a volatile situation. Although the rice price crisis started at the end of 2006, prices have gone up very rapidly within the last one year.

Increased costs of inputs are pushing production cost higher and higher, putting producer and consumer in a confrontational situation. Technology driven "Green Revolution" seesawed throughout its existence, and high input rice production is thus considered as part of Green Revolution.

For the first time, we are realising that our agriculture is directly tied up with global agriculture and market. It does help us understand that we are moving very fast towards the one global market concept. The fluctuations, either of price or production of any major crop in the global market, are affecting other crops and commodities as well. Use of maize in

USA, and oil-seeds in EC, for bio-fuel production has shown impact of the recent price hike of rice.

Another strange development in the era of globalisation is the banning of export of rice by major rice exporting countries. A question that naturally arises is: why this ban when we are proceeding towards one market economy, and how will it effect globalisation? The situation is similar in the case of WTO agreement. When debate is going on globally about the fate of WTO, another issue has come up with regard to trade of staples.

Rice is not only the staple of Asian people, it is also a food security crop for them. Livelihoods of millions of poor people are directly related with the availability and accessibility of this particular crop. The recent ban on export of rice by some countries indicates that they are trying to protect their population from the food crisis at the cost of other countries. It is clearly a violation of the spirit of globalisation.

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more rice. It is widely accepted that developing countries cannot achieve both objectives unless they have inexhaustible resources. They have to prioritise one of them without undermining the other. Bangladesh has to make a hard choice at a time when subsidies in agriculture are rising very rapidly.

As far back as in 2003, the Nobel Laureate Professor Amartya Sen observed that "food subsidy (in India) is mainly geared to keep food prices high for the sellers of food, farmers in general, rather than to make food prices low for the buyers of food. The high incentive to produce more food while giving little help to the poorer people to buy food has produced the massive stocks of food grains that we find in India today." It could be a very good lesson for us, too.

However, in Bangladesh both food deficit and surplus production are equally problematic. It can also be mentioned that because of non-availability of land for expansion, transfer of agriculture land for other uses, and limited scope for further increasing cropping intensity (both are responsible for soil degradation and environmental pollution), it will not be possible for Bangladesh to build a food grain

stock in the country only through domestic production. It can also be mentioned that no other country of the world has put such a high percentage of its land under cultivation as Bangladesh.

Out of more than 100 countries producing rice only 6 (Thailand, Vietnam, Brazil, USA, India and China) export some 75% to 85%, while 35 countries import rice. In reality, only 7% to 9% of global rice production is traded internationally. Some oil producing countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia have resources to buy rice at any price from the international market.

Any crisis in global rice import market will affect Bangladesh adversely, mainly due to limited resources for buying food at high price, and poor bargaining capacity. If there is a food crisis due to short-fall in production either in China or in India, they will get priority over Bangladesh in buying food. This is the context for the re-emergence of the concept of food self-sufficiency in the developing countries.

The number of farm holdings having less than 1 ha land rose to 88.49% in 2005 (agriculture sample survey, June 2006) from 79.87% of 1996. The figure was 70.34% in 1983-84. The remaining 11.51% of farm holdings belong to medium and large farmers having land from 1 ha or above. The number of holdings owning no land (absolute landless) rose to 14.03%, up from 8.67% of 1983-84.

Moreover, these 88.49% farm holdings account for only 40% of the farm area in Bangladesh, and

are net buyers of rice for their own consumption. In addition, absolute landless families are also associated with rice production through sharecropping. It indicates that making distinction between producer and consumer is not that easy, and that they are interlinked/overlapped.

In the open market economy, consumers get priority over producers. Even if prices of essential commodities go up, service holders (government and non-government) could get benefit from their employee through salary increment.

According to the latest agricultural census, over 13 millions farming households (owner and tenant) are directly involved in rice production. Paradoxically, they have no control or say over the prices of their produce. On the other hand, with freeing of agriculture and its integration with the world market, rice producers have become more vulnerable to rice price fluctuation in the world commodity markets. In the absence of any risk management strategies, the poor farmers in Bangladesh are made to bear the entire burden of large fluctuations in international prices of agricultural commodities, in particular rice.

Pursuing a twin approach, i.e. supporting both producer and consumer, to stimulate rice production and stabilise its price will bring little positive effect in future. Rather, it could lead to further increase of rice price, giving benefit only to middle-men who are involved in rice marketing. The

producer should get priority over the consumer in order to create win-win situation for both.

To support both of them simultaneously could be counterproductive and, at times, could go beyond governmental control due to excessive burden of subsidies. What is important is renewed thrust towards increasing rice productivity in the country, which is quite possible provided that strong research and extension facilities are in place and agricultural input (quality seeds, fertilisers, irrigation, and mechanisation) supply systems work smoothly and positively in favour of farmers.

Most importantly, the government policies should be directed towards bringing producer and consumer closer to bring price down by minimising intervention of middle-men and reducing speculations. That is the gigantic challenge ahead for the country. Given the current context of global development, it would be hardly possible for a country like Bangladesh to satisfy both producer and consumer through subsidy.

What is important is to divert scarce subsidy resources for the benefit of producers to increase domestic rice production. Price support to the producer checks distress selling at the time of harvest, and without support to the producer production will go down making rice prices high.

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## Target: Iran?

And even Israeli hardliners know that the repercussions of an attack on Iran would be vicious and long-lasting, heightening the likelihood that Ahmadinejad and other hardliners would remain in power and perhaps embroiling Israel in a regional war. Some US technical and defence experts also argue that even now Israel does not have the ability to be more than a nuisance to Iran's program. Iran's enrichment program is far more dispersed, secret and well protected than the Osirak reactor in Iraq, which Israeli planes destroyed in 1981.

MICHAEL HIRSH

GENERALLY speaking, six decades after the founding of your nation, you shouldn't still be fighting for your right to exist. You should have achieved at least that much. And after the wars of 1948, '67 and '73, and other conflicts -- including two intifadas -- many Israelis would like to think they've honourably battled their way to the right to existence.

But they haven't made it yet. Today, on its 60th birthday, Israel remains as much in existential peril as it was in those early months after the UN General Assembly approved the partition of Palestine and Arab armies attacked the infant state.

Arguably, it is at even greater risk now than it was then. Very soon now Israel could be engaged in the biggest battle for existence it has ever faced in its not-so-short-anything longer history. And the next US president -- whether it is Barack Obama or John McCain -- may have a bigger crisis on his hands than anything since 9/11.

While Israeli officials insist they are sticking to diplomacy, a number of circumstances are aligning to make an Israeli strike on Iran more likely before the end of 2008:

- A new, much more dire Israeli assessment that Iran will have the ability to build an atomic bomb by 2009 (earlier reports had drifted toward 2010 or later).

- The flagging of US-European efforts to pressure Iran economically and isolate it. The Bush administration's Iran point man, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns, has just retired from the State Department -- leaving a huge vacuum -- and many Israelis have a growing sense that Washington is figuring out how to live with an Iranian nuclear capability. Meanwhile, European companies are making new multibillion-dollar investments in Iran's energy sector, including Austria's OMV and Switzerland's EGL.

- The ongoing rebuilding of Hizbullah's missile armada in nearby Lebanon, which gives Iran an ever-greater retaliatory capability, the longer the Israelis wait.

- Iran's Scheherazade-like efforts to endlessly prolong an investigation by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) into the history and intent of its nuclear program. A new IAEA report is due by the third week of May, and Iran has agreed to deliver comments on the agency's ongoing investigation, but the issue is not expected to be resolved by then.

- Russia's willingness to supply Tehran with close-range surface-to-air defense missiles, even as it declares it is willing to join sanctions against Iran. Rumors continue to circulate, though Moscow denies it, that

Russia is negotiating to sell Iran longer-range S-300 anti-aircraft systems. These very sophisticated defenses, once installed, would dramatically alter the odds against Israeli air strikes.

And last but certainly not least, the imminent end of the Bush administration, which is arguably the friendliest -- certainly the most compliant -- US government the Israelis have ever seen.

When Israel attacked Hizbullah in Lebanon in the summer of '06, the Bush administration gave a green light to the Jewish state and deliberately delayed diplomatic discussions to end the war.

Just a few weeks ago Bush approvingly described the Israeli raid on a Syrian reactor last September as a "warning" to Iran and North Korea. An Obama administration is far less likely to cheerlead for Israel, while McCain's approach remains uncertain.

Many Iran experts argue that, despite Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's regular calls for Israel's destruction, it is far from certain that Tehran intends to fully develop a nuclear weapon or, if it did, would actually entertain using it against Israel or any other state.

Ahmadinejad is up for reelection in 2009 and remains unpopular among Iranian governmental elites. Certainly one option for Israel -- which possesses a substantial nuclear arsenal of its

own -- is to apply the time-honoured logic of deterrence against Iran, especially if Ahmadinejad is ousted and cooler heads prevail in Tehran.

And even Israeli hardliners know that the repercussions of an attack on Iran would be vicious and long-lasting, heightening the likelihood that Ahmadinejad and other hardliners would remain in power and perhaps embroiling Israel in a regional war.

Some US technical and defence experts also argue that even now Israel does not have the ability to be more than a nuisance to Iran's program. Iran's enrichment program is far more dispersed, secret and well protected than the Osirak reactor in Iraq, which Israeli planes destroyed in 1981.

"They could destroy all of the facilities at [Iran's] Natanz and it wouldn't seriously set them back," says David Albright, one of Washington's most respected trackers of Iran's nuclear program.

What is beyond dispute, however, is that the longer the Israelis wait, the more resistant the Iranians become to a military solution, particularly if they install those Russian anti-aircraft systems. Iran's new generation of IR-2 centrifuges is harder to detect as well.

"Nobody has yet pointed out that these centrifuges are much easier to put into dispersed, small facilities," Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies said at a briefing in Washington on Wednesday.

And for many Israeli hardliners, there is little choice. Their view is that they have been left, once again, isolated on the world stage. The likelihood of a US strike on Iran has virtually vanished. (On Tehran's nuclear program, that is. A US military action against Iranian targets just across the border from Iraq remains a possibility.)



Bush, still bogged down in Iraq, is looking more each day like a lame duck. While Bush made serious efforts during his last Mideast trip in January -- he's off on another next week -- to disown last fall's National Intelligence Estimate, which concluded that Iran had halted its nuclear weapons program, Washington has not officially revised that estimate.

According to Bruce Riedel, a former official with the National Security Council, even Hillary Clinton's recent threat to "obliterate" Iran if it attacked Israel was seen by some Israelis as a tacit embrace of the new US fallback position: "We can't stop an Iranian bomb, so we'll assert our deterrent against the use of one."

The bottom line is that the longer Israel waits to strike, the more difficult it will become to take out Iran's nuclear program militarily and to endure the fallout diplomatically.

At the same time the promised benefits of waiting -- the hoped-for diplomatic solution based on economic pressure -- seem to be receding. Much depends now on the political survival of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who is engulfed in yet another scandal, this time involving a bribery investigation. But if you're looking for the launch pad of the next global crisis, keep your eyes on Jerusalem.

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## Rules? What rules?

### LETTER FROM AMERICA

Even while Obama was going through the roughest patch of the campaign, with the Rev. Jeremiah Wright and his own slight of small-town Americans threatening to undermine him, Clinton could not persuade voters that she should be the nominee. Which explains why she is calling the rules unfair. It would be tough to play golf with Hillary. She would be demanding mulligans after every shot!

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

IF and when Hillary Clinton quits running for the Democratic presidential nomination, she will do so kicking and screaming. In the meantime, she is busy exposing Barack Obama's weaknesses to the fullest. The West Virginia primary on May 13, which, as expected, Hillary won in a landslide (66% to 27%), is a case in point.

West Virginia is a lilywhite state. It ranks near the bottom in education and income among the fifty

states. In other words, it is full of, in Hillary's own words "hard working Americans, white Americans" who are Hillary's core constituency now. By running in West Virginia, Hillary forced a huge number of Democrats to vote against the presumptive Democratic nominee, Barack Obama. So much for grace.

In her victory speech Hillary was defiant. She blamed the pundits for her predicament, not her hopeless delegate math. She called the race close although she has absolutely no chance of catching

Obama's pledged delegates. She proclaimed herself the better candidate who can win the swing states like Ohio, Pennsylvania and New Hampshire, neglecting to mention that Obama too had won swing states like Missouri, Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Colorado and Virginia.

Her speech was directed mostly at the super delegates, beseeching them to freeze their support for Obama. Unable to win the game according to the existing rules, Hillary wants to change the rules in the middle of the game. The

Democratic National Committee uses 2,025 as the number of delegates denoting a nominating majority, but Hillary now says the number is 2209! (Obama is about 150 delegates away from clinching the nomination). The claim is part of Clinton's argument that delegates from Michigan and Florida must be included.

But, when the Democratic National Committee was disqualifying those states' delegates for holding their primaries in January in violation of the rules, Hillary was fully on board.

Surprisingly, most media pundits interpreted Hillary's May 6 speech, after she narrowly won Indiana and was blown out in North Carolina, as a concession speech, paving the way for her withdrawal from the race. Instead, with very little sleep, she was campaigning in West Virginia the very next morning! And she camped there until the election.

West Virginia is a tiny state with

only 28 pledged delegates. It is not going to change the delegate count by much. Obama wrote it off and made only one token campaign appearance in the state. But listening to Hillary, her consigliere Terry MacAliffe and hit-man Wolfson, one would have assumed that it was another "game changer."

No Democrat has won the presidency without West Virginia, Hillary reminded the West Virginians, adding that John F. Kennedy won the 1960 nomination because West Virginians backed him.

At any moment, the writer was expecting Hillary to break into the late John Denver's 1971 super hit country song about West Virginia: Country roads, take me home To the place I belong West Virginia, mountain momma

Take me home, country roads. Unfortunately, even mountain momma cannot secure the nomination for Hillary. She made way

too many costly mistakes. She was the establishment candidate ("experienced") when people were looking for change. She ran on the platform of inevitability and entitlement and failed to take Obama seriously early on.

Her unwillingness to apologise for her vote to authorise the Iraq war cost her dearly. She ignored the caucus states. With her overwhelming monetary advantage, she figured that she would clinch the nomination on February 5, "Super Tuesday."

When she did not, there was no back-up plan, and she ran out of money. Obama, raising small amounts of money from millions of donors through the internet, was prepared for the long haul and ran off eleven victories in a row, effectively ending the contest.

Hillary and Bill made one crucial blunder: by playing the race card they alienated the African-Americans, who had originally backed Hillary but in the end

endorsed Obama, 9 to 1. And when Hillary attempted to make white racism respectable and played the "white card," she angered the super delegates, a majority of whom now back Obama.

Hillary's argument about Obama's inexperience is legitimate, but the Democratic voters have rejected her as an alternative. Against that, she sounds almost delusional in arguing to super delegates that she would be a better general election candidate. On the basis of what? Every poll shows Democrats prefer Obama over Hillary as their presidential candidate, and Obama beats John McCain more handily in hypothetical match-ups than Hillary.

Indeed, after her narrow victory in Indiana and his landslide win in North Carolina, she is now further behind in delegates and popular votes than she was before the Pennsylvania primary.

Even while Obama was going through the roughest patch of the

campaign, with the Rev. Jeremiah Wright and his own slight of small-town Americans threatening to undermine him, Clinton could not persuade voters that she should be the nominee.

Which explains why she is calling the rules unfair. It would be tough to play golf with Hillary. She would be demanding mulligans after every shot!

Lately, Hillary has been criticising her party's proportional way of apportioning delegates, saying: "If we had the Republican rules, I would already be the nominee."

I just have had an epiphany! There were good reasons why Hillary was cosying up to Republican Fox News Channel and giving interviews to her Republican nemesis Bill O'Reilly. Next time, Hillary Clinton is going to run as a Republican!

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