

Mixed report card

Govt should take note of both good and bad

THE report released this week by Brac University's Institute of Governance Studies was as nuanced and equivocal as befits these paradoxical times, and we urge the government of the day to regard it as a feedback meriting close attention.

There has been a tendency among governments to take cognisance of good news only and to ignore or to dismiss negative critiques. We would like to see the current government which is nonpolitical to mark a departure from this practice and note where it has done well and where it needs to do better.

There is enough positive in the report that the government should feel that the report is sufficiently fair and even-handed to merit strong consideration of the criticism otherwise contained in it.

The government can feel encouraged from the report's observation that the institutional reforms it has undertaken are expected to bring "massive improvement" to the governance of the country, though it leaves room for improvement in terms of accountability.

In addition, the improved service delivery in the sectors of education, law and order, and the judiciary that were reported will both give the government a sense of achievement as well as an idea of what measures it is taking that are working and what areas need more work.

The fact that accountability has dropped and that there is a reported decline in living standard is cause for concern. In addition, the uncertain business environment is another area where there is much room for improvement.

The government is into its last six months, and the focus is on elections. However, the report points to areas both in which it has enjoyed success and in which it could pick up its performance. The government should take this report for what it is -- impartial feedback on what it is doing right and what it is doing wrong -- and act accordingly.

From French fry to condiment

Market windfall round the corner

STAR Business yesterday featured a story whose title could very well have been 'small is beautiful'. On the back of scarcity and high price of food, the bumper output of potato was icing on the cake of record high production of boro. The resulting sense of relief, however, hasn't been without a worry relating to preservation of such perishable food stuff as potato. In a context where we have grown accustomed to wasting nearly 20 percent of our annual cereal output, the prospect of losing out on potato which is more perishable must have been an added anxiety.

In such a thought-provoking background, Ejab Group, the owning company of Quality French Fried Potato with a modest output of eight-nine tonnes of French fry per month to supply to the local food shops is now thinking big. Simultaneous with realising the fuller potential of the domestic market the local French fry company is targeting sales in the huge export market in the Middle East, Europe and in America.

Even for a wide range of small food items we still depend on import despite the huge potential there is in the country for the growth of agro-based food processing industries. We don't mind paying through our noses to get tetra-packed, canned or bottled food including condiments without looking around to see what is on offer courtesy the local manufacturers. They need material support and encouragement from the consumers and the government alike. For the consumers' part, their rather indifferent, even dismissive attitude to local products vis-à-vis their going gaga over popular foreign brands, must be eschewed. As for the government our understanding is that the Bangladesh Bank is trying to persuade the commercial banks to allocate special funds for SME development.

Equity support is essential for the rise of new entrepreneurship which has seen a slack for quite some time for lack of business confidence. The job is cut out for the concerned ministries, banks and business and chamber bodies to put their heads together to bolster SME in concert.

Russia's new czar?



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

THE style had been typically that of a KGB operative, quiet, sneaky and even secretive. That's the way the little-known spy adopted in catapulting his country to its lost height as he became the second president of the Russian Federation, the largest part of once-powerful Soviet Union. Vladimir Putin, who laments the collapse of the Union as the "greatest geo-political catastrophe of the century" couldn't have been oblivious of the humiliation it entailed, with the loss of the country's stature as a superpower if not of the ideological defeat accompanying it.

To add insult to the injury, Boris Yeltsin, his predecessor, had left the country in a total mess, with high corruption, the rise of the mafia and unruly oligarchs who controlled the economy in the name of free-market and created anarchy in the name of democracy, chronic unemployment and critically devalued currency.

Obviously, it was far from easy to restore the country's socio-economic and political order as well as its financial discipline. But, as a judo expert, he combated the hostile forces and went about consolidating the central authority over the world's still biggest

geographical entity with a determination that took everyone by surprise. With a new class of loyalists known as "Siloviki," comprised of Putin's former KGB fraternity and ambitious young politicians, he could bring up faithful people like Medvedev from almost nowhere. Now elected the federation's third president, the incumbent himself called it a day for constitutional bar, and made way for Medvedev to take over the presidency in May.

It was, however, merely swapping over of the offices, because Putin, still superbly fit at 55, decided to remain part of the Kremlin's power-structure as prime minister but, more importantly, also as the head of the ruling United Russia Party thus forming a duumvirate of state authority. This bizarre change of guard obviously raised the question as to how it would work out and precisely who was the Kremlin's real boss.

Amid conflicting views, it is worthwhile recalling some of the antecedents of the Soviet system Putin himself grew up with. In that system, the real power used to be held by the Party, its general secretary and the Politburo, who made all important policy decisions. In tandem, the government headed by the president was charged with

PERSPECTIVES

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state protocol and running of the administration.

As the real power is exercised by the party boss, a similar dual arrangement between Putin and Medvedev may be envisaged, where the former fills the role of Soviet-style party secretary, wielding all vital powers and also calling the shots. Meantime, Medvedev, Putin's longtime protege, who was only a deputy prime minister earlier is expected to remain happy while utilising his vast experience as former head of Gazprom, Russia's giant energy firm, to advance the cause of economic development for raising the people's living standard.

Remember the Brezhnev-Podgorny equation, for example? It is not surprising that Putin, now of the status of a national leader after eight years of presidency when he single-handedly not only salvaged Russia from economic morass but also gave the country political and economic stability that put Russia among the ten most highly developed countries, is now inclined to wear another hat, that of the "older statesman," to guide the destiny of the nation.

No one seems to have objection to that inclination, as is reflected by his exceptionally high approval rating. "The Putin effect," as they call it, has achieved it all. His pas-

sionate fondness for Czar Peter the Great, whom he takes to be his role model and whose portrait embellishes his office, points to his predilection and the vision he nourishes. To help in materialising his dream Putin is well aware of the bonanza he, together with Medvedev, could use. He also knows its potential to command for more influence over Western Europe than it did when the Red Army's 100 division, along with Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBM) were deployed in Europe at the height of the Cold War.

In addition to the country's stockpile of nuclear warheads only second to the US in size Russia today has 20 percent of the world's gas reserves and at least 7 percent of proven oil reserves, some 75 bn barrels, the world's largest forest reserves apart from a quarter of its fresh water resources. Russia's new found prosperity has spawned a consumer boom in the country, and made it an attractive trade destination to do business with.

Putin wanted to showcase the occasion of the reshuffling in Kremlin in his style with the attendance of the rock band *Deep Purple*, which both he and his successor are fond of. *Swan Lake*, being out of vogue, was discarded. The most striking aspect of the



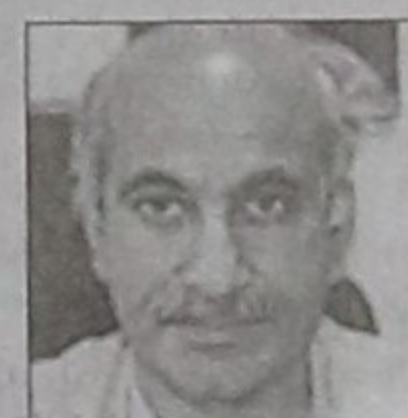
Medvedev's swearing-in had been the display of Russia's youthfulness, with tele-savvy new power-players of Kremlin who oozed vitality before 200 dignitaries from around the world. After a long hiatus, also back was traditional military parade for the first time after 1992. A new Russia was on the march. Putin has transformed Russia to an extent that it is once again reckoned a major power.

It's more than that. Soviet Union war a uni-dimensional

superpower -- a sort of Upper Volta with rockets, as the joke went round during those days. But Putin's Russia is a multi-dimensional power. So much so, it has made even Europe critically dependent on Russia for its energy. Imagine what can happen to the continent if the Kremlin turns off the gas export tap, as it recently did to late-paying Ukraine.

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From promise to compromise



M.J. AKBAR

LANGUAGE facilitates communication; but becomes a trap when misused. The misuse may not be deliberate, merely complacent. But a complacent phrase can enter the discourse, shape decision or indecision and leave a sharp, self-inflicted wound. "Midterm election" is a case in point. One is not being pedantic; a midterm election does not have to be precisely in the middle of a government's term. But there is a political definition of "midterm" that separates it clearly from the "end-term" phase of a government's life.

In the British-Indian system of a parliamentary democracy, a "midterm" election means any election called prematurely, either because the government feels it is advantageous to go back to the people, or because it no longer has the majority to survive, and parliament cannot offer an alternative ruling formation.

A government slips from "mid-term" to "end-term" condition

But when the same prime minister walked away from the nuclear deal in order to save his government, his personal credibility took a beating. He became just another politician who was ready to compromise the national interest in order to remain in power. If the deal was truly so vital to India's future, then it was more important than the few remaining months of his government. And if it was less important than his government, then it was not so vital after all.

not when it has lost its majority, but when it has lost its ability to govern. Only a confident government goes for a midterm poll because it believes it will be re-elected; an "end-term" election takes place under an anxious one.

Tony Blair, the most successful Labour prime minister in history, won three elections by going to the polls early. He had not lost his majority; he chose an earlier date because he considered it politically propitious, and it was the point at which he could maximise the extent of his victory.

His successor, Gordon Brown, took office a year ago and entered his "end-term" phase within four months, when he somersaulted out of an implicit promise to call an early election.

He may retain the confidence of parliament, but he lost the confidence of the country. Since then he has been Dead Man Walking. If Labour does not change him he will take Labour to the grave: where else would you expect a Dead Man to go?

BYLINE

A calendar has something, but not a whole lot, to do with a government's credibility. Governments do not explode suddenly, in a blaze of fireworks. The more objective metaphor is colder.

Governments melt like icebergs, piece by piece, before sinking into oblivion. The moment this process accelerates, the "end-term" begins.

The decisive moment for the Manmohan Singh government came last August, when it seemed, for about a week, ready to challenge his coalition in pursuit of a policy which the prime minister believed was in the national interest: the Indo-US nuclear deal.

The force and conviction with which the prime minister hyped up the deal was sufficient to convince many in-between that there must be something in what he said. The prime minister was, not so subtly, transferring his personal credibility to the deal, and many were ready to buy this

transfer. But when the same prime minister walked away from the nuclear deal in order to save his government, his personal credibility took a beating. He became just another politician who was ready to compromise the national interest in order to remain in power.

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After that, the Communists began to wag the dog, creating just enough distance from the alliance they had delivered, baby-sat and nurtured. Last August, the Congress could have signed the deal and increased its seats in a subsequent election.

After Gujarat, its tide began to ebb. In August 2007, the Gujarat elections had not taken place. The BJP was still a

defeated party. Narendra Modi not only saved his party; he also shifted the key debate to governance.

His victory was on the single issue of good governance. And just at that point, the Manmohan Singh coalition's reputation for competent governance, never, particularly high, began to wither. If it had tainted itself with compromise on the nuclear deal, it began to seem pathetic in tackling economic issues.

It is now evident that inflation ate away any goodwill for the government at a rapid pace: the fire of the belly rarely leaves authority untouched. The mismanagement of oil prices speaks for itself.

Oil prices did not start rising last week; this has been a phenomenon spread over the whole of last year. Many serious economists were predicting the prices we are witnessing today. A government with time on its side has the ability to take tough decisions.

By winter it was clear that the government had limited options: it could raise prices, which would mean risking the stability of the coalition and a further push on inflation. If that was unacceptable, it could have initiated measures to reduce consumption.

Or, it could have foreseen the crisis ahead, argued that only a government with renewed strength could handle such a

crisis, and gone to the people. It did nothing. Today, it is in a complete bind.

There is no money to meet higher costs (particularly after the great squander of national wealth in order to bribe voters in the Budget), and no will to raise it from consumers. If prices do not go up, we will see an oil famine in the country as oil companies run out of funds.

A government that could have won an election last August is sitting, heavy-bottomed, on a panic button eight months later. There is only pseudo-drama in the much-debated question on whether the government should call an election in October-November or wait for the scheduled end of parliament in March-April. It doesn't matter much anymore.

The opposition, which was once eager for a midterm poll in the forlorn belief that anything was better than the status quo, is now quite happy at the thought that elections might take place only next March.

In its view, the longer this government sticks around in office, the more seats it will lose. Yes, of course, a delay would enable some ministers to make more money, but who can argue with the kismet of the corrupt?

The Manmohan Singh government has travelled from promise to compromise; it will need huge dollops of good kismet to travel any further.

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Thank you, Senator Ted Kennedy!

LETTER FROM AMERICA

What kept Bangladeshis' faith in America was the American press's relentless criticism of Pakistan, Pandit Ravi Shankar and Beate George Harrison's "Concert for Bangladesh" in New York, and the pressure applied to Pakistan by legislators like Senator Kennedy. Ted Kennedy visited Bangladeshi refugee camps in India and burst into tears on seeing their suffering. After independence, Senator Kennedy visited Bangladesh in 1972 and addressed students at Dhaka University campus.

FAKHURUDDIN AHMED

SENATOR Edward Kennedy, diagnosed with malignant brain tumour last month, is expected to beat it and live many more productive years. This may be an opportune time for reflection, and expression of Bangladesh's gratitude to the senator from Massachusetts.

Let us flash back to Bangladesh's war of liberation in 1971. Besides India, Bangladesh had few, if any, supporters or advocates. While countries like Australia and the UK were sympathetic to the electoral wrongs and atrocities committed against the Bangladeshis by the Pakistanis,

superpowers like China and the US were hostile to Bangladesh.

As it was Pakistan's staunch ally against India, Bangladeshis did not expect much from China. That America, the world's second largest democracy, was fully in the democracy-destroying Pakistan's corner was a huge disappointment. More so, because Sheikh Mujib was generally perceived to be "pro-American."

Eager to make overtures to China, President Richard Nixon and the National Security Advisor, Henry "Bangladesh is a basket case" Kissinger, found Bangladesh's independence

struggle an impediment to America's geopolitical interests at that time. For interfering with Kissinger's grand plans for glory with a liberation struggle, Kissinger developed a pathological dislike of Sheikh Mujib.

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seeing their suffering. After independence, Senator Kennedy visited Bangladesh in 1972 and addressed students at Dhaka University campus.

That Senator Kennedy would come to the aid of Bangladeshis at the most critical time in their history was not a surprise. Although fabulously rich, the Kennedys have always looked out for the poor and the oppressed.

After Franklin D. Roosevelt enticed the blacks away from the Republican Party ("Lincoln's Party") with the New Deal, John F. Kennedy consolidated the black vote as the most reliable block of Democratic Party supporters. In 1960, blacks voted overwhelmingly for John Kennedy, who promised them civil rights; a promise that was kept by his vice-president Lyndon Johnson after John Kennedy was assassinated in 1963.

On April 4, 1968, Robert Kennedy, who had decided to run for the presidency a month earlier, was scheduled to address a gathering of African Americans in Indianapolis.

He had just learned that civil

rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had been assassinated, something his black audience did not know. Police advised RFK that it was too dangerous. Kennedy insisted on going ahead and giving them the bad news himself.

In one of the great speeches in American history, Robert Kennedy said, among other things: "For those of you who are black and are tempted to be filled with hatred and mistrust of the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I would only say that I can also feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man."

"What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black." (Sounds a lot like Barack Obama)

Blacks applauded Kennedy's

three-minute speech! Such is the Kennedy magic that at a moment of black rage, when any white man's life would have been in danger, Robert Kennedy elicited applause from a ghetto audience.

Tragically, two months later, on June 5, Robert Kennedy, too, was assassinated. (Last week, Hillary Clinton stupidly cited RFK's assassination in June as one of her rationale for staying in the race so long.)

Ted Kennedy also has that magic. When Senator John Kennedy was elected president in 1960, Edward Moore Kennedy was under 30, (born February 22, 1932), therefore, ineligible to fill JFK's Senate seat.

A family friend kept the seat warm until Ted crossed 30 and could run in 1962. Teddy Kennedy's Republican opponent had it right: "If your name was Edward Moore, not Edward Moore Kennedy, your candidature would have been a joke!" Harvard-educated Teddy won.

After RFK's assassination, Ted Kennedy became the surrogate father to both JFK and RFK's children. When President

Kennedy's widow Jackie Kennedy wanted to marry the Greek tycoon Aristotle Onassis in 1968, Ted Kennedy negotiated the nuptial terms: financial, as well as a strict ban on procreation! (Jackie was 39)

Teddy Kennedy saw the clan through all their tragedies, (the latest of which was the plane-crash death of JFK's only son John in 1999), which impacted his presidential ambitions negatively. Kennedy unsuccessfully attempted to wrest the nomination away from sitting Democratic President Carter in 1980.

What really destroyed Kennedy's presidential aspirations was the Chappaquiddick incident of 1969. Kennedy was driving a car with Mary Joe Kopechne as his passenger when the senator drove off Dike Bridge into the channel between Chappaquiddick Island and Martha's Vineyard. The Senator swam to safety, but Kopechne died in the car.

Kennedy left the scene and did not call authorities until after Kopechne's body was discovered the following day. He pled guilty

to leaving the scene of an accident and was sentenced to two months in jail, suspended.

After returning to the Senate in 1980, Kennedy dedicated himself to prodigious legislating. Forming alliances with the Republicans when necessary, Ted Kennedy has become one of the most successful legislators in the US Senate's history. Legislations sponsored by Ted Kennedy have touched the lives of every American in a positive way.

By endorsing Barack Obama, Senator Ted Kennedy, Caroline Kennedy and (Teddy's son) Congressman Patrick Kennedy symbolically passed the Kennedy torch to Obama on the dais of American University in Washington, DC, the site of President John Kennedy's graduation speech in 1963.

One wishes and prays that Senator Ted Kennedy is around to see a Kennedy protégé take over the White House should Barack Obama be elected president in November.

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