

Review of EPR

A welcome step

THE government's move to relax some of the major provisions of the emergency power rules (EPR) is a welcome step. A committee set up to address the issue has also met recently. Although the focus of the government apparently is on the issue of granting bail, particularly in the cases relating to corruption, we are heartened to learn that the said committee will also look at all other aspects of the EPR that would permit, according to an advisor, the strengthening of the environment of confidence. And we presume that the confidence he was referring to relates to the political milieu that occurs in the country at the moment.

Right to seek bail is an inalienable right of a citizen, and there is no doubt that the current proviso regarding bail is far too stringent as to abridge the fundamental rights. The power of the court also stands denuded in so far as the EPR prevents it from entertaining bail petitions under the current Emergency. We feel that the government should leave it to the discretion of the relevant courts to grant bail, depending on the merit of the case and as governed by the factors that the courts consider before allowing bail.

Needless to say too, the country is in an election mode and the people are eagerly waiting for the promised elections before the end of the year. We are sure that relaxing the relevant provisions of the EPR will facilitate the election process in the country - particularly when there is the need for the political parties to incorporate changes within the party, which can be done effectively only by keeping the constituencies informed of the party reform. The voters need also to be made aware of the various aspects of the electoral reforms that the election commission has proposed, and in this regard the political parties can supplement the efforts of the election commission.

No doubt, while considering the matter of relaxation of the EPR the first and foremost in the list for consideration ought to be the removing of the fetters on the media, print as well as electronic. If the government actually believes that the media is the parliament in the absence of an elected people's house, then it is imperative that the media is allowed to function without hindrance or let.

However, we would like to stress the fact that the objective behind the relaxation of the emergency rules must stem from the sincere intention to uphold the rule of law and to engender an aura of confidence leading up to a free and fair election, and not for political convenience. Otherwise the exercise might prove futile.

Spurt in export growth

Give all assistance to sustain the upward trend

IT is morale-boosting news that the country's export has seen 14.66 percent growth during the July-April period, compared to the performance during the corresponding period last fiscal. During this period (FY 2007-2008) export earning was registered at US\$ 11.37 billion and we feel it is no insignificant figure for a developing country like Bangladesh.

A study done by the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB) says that knitwear is the number one foreign exchange earning commodity at the moment, which alone fetched US\$ 4.39 billion in July-April period, and at the same time export earning from woven garments reached the figure of US\$ 4.19 billion, thereby registering a growth of 20 percent and 9.73 percent respectively. It is further heartening to learn that that attracted by competitive price and quality, more and more overseas buyers of RMG products are coming to Bangladesh and placing large orders. Among them are many big names in the fashion world. As for other export items, like vegetables, petroleum by-products, tea, cut flower, foliage and textile fabric, there has been a 60 percent growth during the July-April period.

The growth indicators look healthy and are indicative of a steady upward movement that needs to be sustained to leave a long-lasting impact on the economy of the country. RMG being the second largest foreign currency-earning sector, it has to be given the required protection and support for expansion so that it can meet the envisaged 20 percent export growth up to 2013. At the same time the Export promotion Bureau should endeavour to develop and include more non-traditional items to the export list.

One thing that comes out clear from the export growth figures is that our business community can operate at the international level with ease and deliver with the minimum of facilities. We are confident they will do even better if the relevant government organisations can play well the role of facilitators. By all means, our export revenue should keep rising.

Towards a greater purpose



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

AMID rumours and speculations for sometime past, Sheikh Hasina, the AL chief has been freed at long last after almost one year of incarceration following her indictment in an extortion case, the proceedings of which are still going on.

Yet, what had been the mechanism that led to her unconditional but temporary release is not quite understood by this scribe, who has, however, felt immensely relieved at the thaw in the dialogue the government undertook recently to reach a broad understanding with the political stakeholders with regard to the ensuing election and the shape of things beyond it.

The caretaker government's

PERSPECTIVES

The time is, indeed, overdue to shift our focus to where our people are vulnerable, instead of squabbling among ourselves. The quicker we can settle down, the more expeditiously we can turn to our starving millions, whom hunger and poverty stare in the face. This is no time either for political experimentation or for getting bogged down in fresh controversies. Rather, it's time for moving ahead by jettisoning the baggage of the past.

commitment, among other things, to ensure a credible election with the participation of all political parties bumped into a roadblock when the country's two major political parties refused to join either the dialogue or an election unless their top leaders were unconditionally released from their detention.

It means an undoing of the government's scheme of things and priorities, which it understandably wants to avoid at this critical juncture when things are worsening with every passing day. The spiraling prices of essentials as well as the food crisis in the country have been exacerbated by similar increases in the prices of food and energy in the international market.

As a bleak outlook persists in

the country's economic sector, the interim government obviously wants to avoid a brush with the country's political forces and is waiting to transfer power to the next government.

As a result, the caretaker government seems to have retreated from its rigid position held earlier so as to let the dialogue, and eventually the election also, to go unhindered, as also wanted by the international community, particularly the donor countries.

This consideration, on the part of the authority, could have led to a change of heart in the higher echelon of policy makers. The medical board's recommendation for Hasina's treatment abroad came handy in this regard, for issuing an executive order for her release. Renewed

cooperation between the government and the AL is already in the offing, as was witnessed in the latter's symbolic participation in the dialogue at Sudha Sadan and Sheikh Hasina's tele-talk with the chief adviser.

All said and done, kudos to the team that produced the positive development through deft handling of the issue, and also cheers to the AL for its forward looking stance and for being able to evoke a sense of deja vu surrounding the whole episode.

A lackadaisical BNP, torn by its intra-party rancour and wrangling, would be well advised to follow suit if, of course, a similar government gesture is also extended to it -- although the party deserves only comeuppance, not clemency.



Baggage from the past needs to be jettisoned.

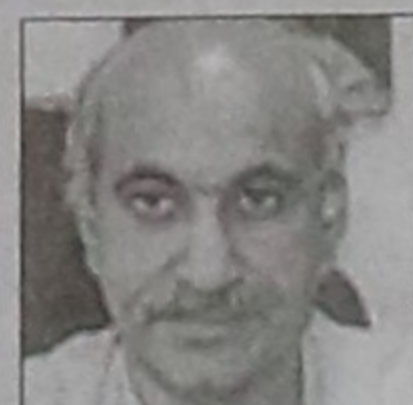
The nation has long been at war with itself, and it's high time to bury the hatchet. We would love to believe that a star-studded government like the present one is endowed with insight, enabling it to see where the nation bleeds and how to heal it.

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The quicker we can settle down, the more expeditiously we can turn to our starving millions, whom hunger and poverty stare in the face. This is no time either for political experimentation or for getting bogged down in fresh controversies. Rather, it's time for moving ahead by jettisoning the baggage of the past.

Brig (retd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

Calculator versus calendar



M.J. AKBAR

HAS Mrs. Sonia Gandhi begun the Congress campaign for the next general election? June has already witnessed a trip to Mizoram after a decade and a half; later in the month, she will be in Aurangabad on a schedule that has taken the Maharashtra Congress a bit by surprise. The Northeast and Maharashtra are regions where support for her party has softened, but, according to her strategists, not beyond recovery. If the Congress cannot retain these seats, it is going to be in boiling hot water.

The theme of her speech is also a marker for the party's election campaign. It will flog the Indo-US nuclear deal as the panacea for all ills, hoping to solve two problems with one promise. The logic runs thus: the deal will make us independent of that evil thing called oil, which has created this vile inflation. Not our fault, brothers and sisters: it's either Opec or the Marxists, take your pick.

By placing it on the election

BYLINE

If Mrs Sonia Gandhi goes to Vidarbha in Maharashtra, another traditional Congress seat-catchment area, and picks up a few sounds from the ground, she will hear a question from the fertiliser-and-hope-starved farmer. He watches television. He knows about the 20-20 cricket tournament organised by Sharad Pawar. He now knows that the state government, doubtless under pressure from the patron, waived away the entertainment tax on stadium tickets, losing more than a hundred crores with just this one decision.

agenda, Mrs Gandhi and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will also hope to blunt post-election objections by the Left, arguing that the deal has been purified by electoral holy water.

It is not an argument that will change the Left, but the Congress believes that the Left will be a much-chastened force, depleted by as many as 20 MPs from its current strength, while the Congress will return with its numbers more or less intact. If its current crop of allies withers away, it will use the leeway of time offered by a generous president of India to woo replacements from the Third Front or even the NDA ensemble. To be more specific, Mulayam Singh Yadav and his MPs will be invited to join the government the next time, instead of doing duty for five years near the door, waiting for crumbs to descend from the prime minister's high table.

If Lalu Yadav collapses, intermediaries will rush to Nitish Kumar and attempt to wean him

away from the BJP; and Naveen Patnaik of Orissa will always be welcome in the name of secularism. In any case, the Congress will not be vulnerable to Marxist "blackmail."

The only thorn amidst the roses of such a scenario is that it might be one year too late. Such an election outcome would have been far more likely if the Congress had gone to the polls last August, when the Left took a final decision to stop the Indo-US nuclear deal. The immediate Congress response was aggressive. The prime minister dared the Left to do its worst, and Mrs Gandhi went on the offensive during a speech in Haryana.

But it was a very different world in August 2006. The BJP was still in utter disarray. The Gujarat elections had not taken place, so the Congress had not been routed there: the BJP's self-confidence only began to return with that result. The nuclear debate still evoked a frisson of excitement from the urban

Indian middle-class, which has convinced itself that America adds a Midas' touch to their present and future (the Greenback Dollar may be undergoing palpitations currently, but no Midas was ever more attractive than the Almighty Green Card).

That frisson has flattened. The middle class, whose interest had peaked with the media campaign of last year, has a question now: if the deal was genuinely crucial to the national interest, why didn't the Congress defy the Marxists and go ahead? Was survival in power for a few months more important for the Congress than the national interest?

For more than one reason, an election last autumn would have seen a return of the Congress-led coalition to Delhi. But that moment was lost, apparently because Congress' allies were not ready to forsake the comforts of office for 18 months in pursuit of that roulette game called

elections. Lalu Yadav and Sharad Pawar went public with their objections; and the DMK murmured its unhappiness in the typical half-bitten vowels that are its political trademark.

Nine months later, the environment is besieged by concerns that are far more potentially fatal to a ruling coalition. Inflation and economic mismanagement have eroded its support. No one yet knows who will win the next general elections, but there is growing belief about who will lose it.

Last August, a Sheila Dikshit would have ensured a Congress victory in most of the seven Lok Sabha seats in Delhi. This year the Delhi voter, still enamoured of Mrs Dikshit, is wondering if there is any way by which it can retain her but demolish the Congress. (There isn't. You either get both or neither.)

When the body weakens it attracts the most curious ailments. If Mrs Sonia Gandhi goes to Vidarbha in Maharashtra, another traditional Congress seat-catchment area, and picks up a few sounds from the ground, she will hear a question from the fertiliser-and-hope-starved farmer. He watches television. He knows about the 20-20 cricket tournament organised by Sharad Pawar.

He now knows that the state government, doubtless under pressure from the patron, waived away the entertainment tax on stadium tickets, losing

more than a hundred crores with just this one decision. The farmer is asking why this money could not have been collected and used to alleviate the difficult conditions he faces.

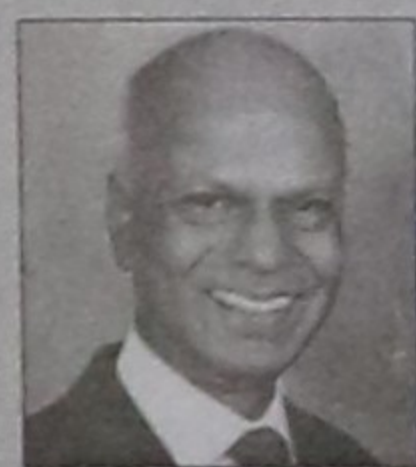
Mrs Sonia Gandhi would not be out in this heat, which also means that it is more difficult to obtain a crowd, without an agenda and almost certainly a calendar. Do they indicate a general election in November? India is a large country, and the sooner you begin the better.

You could argue that she is on the road, using her credibility to explain her government's policies. But why waste credibility on a practice match, rather than the real tournament? The most reasonable assessment, in the absence of any confirmation, is that Mrs Gandhi's tours are a precaution against the sudden necessity of going to polls before winter, along with elections to five states that have to be held by then.

The cynical school of Congress thought, always a large and ever-increasing academy, believes that a November election would serve no purpose other than slicing three months of power, with its attendant lucrative benefits. But each month of delay will mean a few seats less for the Congress, not more. The Congress party is staring obsessively at a calendar just now. Someone should also bring out a calculator.

M.J. Akbar is Director of Publications, Cover.

European Union: Is this the end of a dream?



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM
writes from Madrid

LETTER FROM EUROPE

But things have changed since then. The memories of the two World Wars have faded. The possibility of another war among the major European powers looks so remote, and the disenchantment with the workings of the EU among the ordinary citizens is so strong, that the idea of a closer political union like the United States of Europe is fast disappearing from the public mind.

pages), abstruse legal document which is so complex that even the Brussels based Eurocrats who are supposed to have written it under the aegis of Valerie Giscard d'Estang, a former French prime minister, do not quite understand it, far less explain it to the ordinary people.

Besides having a full-time European Council president and a powerful foreign policy chief for the first time, EU technocrats insist that this treaty will make the decision-making process at the highest levels of the EU bureaucracy more efficient.

They also claim that the EU will become a far more democratic organisation because the European parliament and the national parliaments will play greater roles in the decision-

making process. At the same time, they hope that the new structure will empower the EU to play a greater political role on the world stage.

To come into effect, the treaty must be ratified by all the 27 member countries. Unfortunately, the approval process is not the same in all the member countries. 26 members have given this power to the legislative bodies and executive organs of their governments. Ireland is the only exception. It decided to hold a referendum on this issue.

So even though Ireland has less than 1% of the EU's total population (500 million), it has effectively stopped the Lisbon Treaty in its tracks. Eighteen members have already given the green light to the treaty.

The British House of Commons recently passed the bill. It is now in the House of Lords for ratification. Most probably, Prime Minister Brown will now come under heavy pressure to abandon the ratification process.

A lot of EU supporters think that the Irish have been ungrateful to the EU by rejecting the treaty. They point out, with some justification, that of all the EU members, the Irish have benefited the most from the EU's generous largesse (more than 40 billion euros), which has transformed Ireland from a poor, insular, largely agricultural country into one of the most prosperous countries of Europe.

Is it true that the Irish have been ungrateful? Probably not.

It all depends on one's perspectives. At the heart of the debate is the question of what the Europeans, including the Irish, really want. Do they perceive the EU only as an economic union or also as a budding political entity which will one day become the United States of Europe?

There is no doubt that the primary objective of the founding fathers of the EU was political. The search for an integrated European Union owes its origin to the age-old rivalry between Germany and France, which caused two World Wars in the same century with devastating consequences.

In order to build a bridge between France and Germany and to lessen the risk of another Franco-German war, a French civil servant called Jean Monnet and the then French foreign minister, Robert Schuman, put forward the idea of a new framework for Western Europe in May 1950.

An independent supranational authority to administer a common market for coal and steel -- two items then considered as absolutely essential for

all war efforts -- was set up in 1951 by France, West Germany, Italy and three Benelux countries.

The members of this semi-federal organisation, called the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), agreed to abolish all customs barriers and discriminatory practices affecting these two commodities.

Although the immediate objectives covered only economic matters, many members of the elite in both France and Germany nourished the idea of an eventual political integration of the member states, which would once and for all remove the possibility of another war in Europe.

But things have changed since then. The memories of the two World Wars have faded. The possibility of another war among the major European powers looks so remote, and the disenchantment with the workings of the EU among the ordinary citizens is so strong, that the idea of a closer political union like the United States of Europe is fast disappearing from the public mind.

Many of them tend to think

that these are elite projects, which have nothing to do with the day to day problems and worries of the ordinary citizens like rising food prices, the oil crisis and immigration.

Then, of course, there are the important issues of national identity and sovereignty, which arouse strong feelings among many citizens. Actually, most Europeans do not want to lose their national identities, their languages and their cultures.

The Irish voters, in particular, do not want to lose their much-cherished neutrality in matters of war and peace. Most of them also fear that in the name of Europe, the Lisbon Treaty will force them to change their anti-abortion law and Catholic habits.

Many political analysts believe that if the Lisbon Treaty were put to popular vote in other member countries instead of being bamboozled through the legislatures, the voters would reject it.

So, what will happen now? Most probably, the ratification process through the legislative assemblies will continue, and if 26 of the 27 members ratify the

treaty, Ireland will be asked to hold a second referendum.

According many political analysts, it is very likely that the Irish will reject it again. The Irish public opinion is very much in consonance with public opinion in countries like Britain, France and Holland, where the governments have decided not to hold referendums on this issue.

There is a general mistrust of the high-powered elitist Eurocrats of Brussels who, in the opinion of many ordinary citizens, do not have enough legitimacy because they were never elected democratically by the people.

Now the question is: Will the European Union change the ratification rules to suit its purpose, or will it eventually abandon its federalist dream of converting itself into a full-fledged United States of Europe and, instead, settle for an arrangement under which the EU will only deal with economic matters and sovereignty will unequivocally lie with the national governments?

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