

Is the train on the right track?

Despite the fact that the sad episodes of corruption, violence, repression and abject abuse of power of the past government still haunt their memories as nightmares, they have begun to believe that running the affairs of a country is not the task of an unelected non-political government.

HUSAIN IMAM

THE time is probably ripe to assess whether the caretaker government of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed has been, as promised, able to lift the derailed political train of Bangladesh from the abyss and put it on the right track. If you ask me, the answer is yes, the answer is no.

Yes, because it has, by preparing a fairly accurate voter list and holding four city corporation and nine pourashava elections successfully, set in motion the much needed electoral process.

No, because the people are still not sure whether the train is on the right track that will take it to its ultimate destination -- the parliament building at Manik Mia Avenue. Even if it is on the right track, one is not sure whether the train will be able to reach its destination without having the

borjis (bandits) back on board. The reasons are simple:

One: Despite the fact that the chief adviser, the army chief and the chief election commissioner have time and again reassured the public that the national election will be held by the end of December 2008 at any cost (*mori o bachi* in the words of the CEC), with hardly four months in hand, people still do not have a clear view of the bogies of the electoral train for national election with their naked eyes.

Two: The government's determination to go ahead with the *upazila* polls in October this year, before national polls, against the will of the two major parties -- Awami League and BNP -- has not only raised a wall to obscure the electoral scenario of national election, it has also given rise to an air of uncertainty and scepticism about the election.

Three: The bandits, we say godfathers, who were put behind bars (more appropriately in quarantine camp) or kept on the run on charges of wanton corruption, violence, loot, extortion and abuse of state power, now seem to be flexing their muscles to stage a comeback with garlands around their necks and making V-sign with their fingers, thanks to the handling, or should we say mis-handling, of the cases. Forgive me if I am wrong.

Let's take stock of the situation. The government, the Election Commission and the armed forces have done an excellent job in preparing a fairly accurate voter list with photos, and thus fulfilled one of their prime responsibilities as a caretaker government.

They have also, to their full credit, separated the judiciary from the executive, reconstituted



Destination unknown.

the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), the Election Commission (EC), the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the Public Service Commission (PSC).

The rest are sad stories. The much talked about political reform hasn't met with any success. The attempt to change the top leadership of the two political parties who ruled the country over the last 15 years has backfired.

The possibility of emergence of a third political force to the liking of the caretaker government or the civil society has remained as bleak as it was before. Qualitative change in political culture remains a distant cry.

Administrative reform is not even on the agenda anymore. Electoral reform has not progressed as expected. Even the question of registration of the political parties is still uncertain.

To talk or think about a conge-

nal atmosphere for a free, fair and credible election under emergency rules is bound to receive a mixed reaction from many a quarter at home and abroad. The idea of balancing Awami League with BNP in order to ensure a level playing field was ridiculous.

The anti-corruption drive, the only reason, other than preparation of a correct voter list with photos, that had given the present caretaker government the legitimacy by the people to run the country under emergency rules and extend their tenure well beyond their constitutionally mandated period of 90 days, seems to have run into trouble, if not disarray.

Setting up of a Truth and Accountability Commission (TAC) at the flag end of the tenure of the government to ease the burden on the judiciary in handling the innumerable graft cases filed by the ACC, and the response of the higher courts to the appeals against the verdicts of the lower courts are manifestations of the case in point.

The general people thought that the anti-corruption drive of

the caretaker government would reduce corruption, lessen their harassment at the hands of the government agencies, lower the prices of essentials and utility services, and bring about some comfort in their daily life. That did not happen.

According to a TIB survey report, corruption has decreased in the upper level, thanks to the ACC and other agencies for their relentless effort and courageous steps, but it has increased in the middle and lower levels of administration, directly affecting the common people.

On top of it, the spiralling prices of food and other essential items, reaching far beyond the buying capacity of middle and lower income groups, shrinking of employment opportunities, and acute and persistent crisis of water, electricity and fertiliser have made both the farmers and the general public less and less interested in the reform measures of the caretaker government.

The people are no longer prepared to accept that all these problems are not the making of the incumbent government, nor

are they willing to understand that most of these problems are the legacy of the most corrupt and anti-people governments of the past.

They are no more interested to know that the prices food, fuel and other essential items have gone to an all-time high in the international market in the recent months, nor are they willing to listen to the argument that the government had very little leverage in their hands to control the internal market price in an open market economy.

To be frank, despite the fact that the sad episodes of corruption, violence, repression and abject abuse of power of the past government still haunt their memories as nightmares, they have begun to believe that running the affairs of a country is not the task of an unelected non-political government. They have begun to think that the earlier the caretaker government holds national election and hands over power to a truly representative elected government the better it will be.

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Indo-Bangla relations: A new perspective

India is rapidly emerging as an economic powerhouse, and in the next 50 years will have one of the world's biggest economies. Bangladesh remains at the threshold of this economic boom, with the opportunity to cash in on the Indian as well as Chinese economic boom.

AHMED KHALED RASHID

THE assumption of power by the present caretaker government ushered in a fresh dimension in the foreign policy of the country. One of the main features of the policy priorities was improving relationships with neighbouring countries, particularly India.

India-Bangladesh relations suffered a lot in the last few years, due to mistrust and lack of political will. There was no improvement in the critical areas of cross-border violence, water sharing, trade deficit and cooperation in countering terrorism.

The previous government adopted a "Look East" policy, apparently to negate India's economic and political influence over Bangladesh. However, the policy failed to achieve any meaningful result in terms of boosting trade or forging strategic cooperation with eastern countries.

The only important outcome was an elevated level of cooperation with China in the area of trade and commerce, defence, and culture. There were a number of high-level visits between China and Bangladesh, whereas significant Indo-Bangla exchanges were rare.

These friendly overtures from

Bangladesh towards China only contributed to alienating India further. This single-minded and myopic approach had dangerous consequences for India-locked Bangladesh.

Instead of making progress in dealing with the urgent and thorny issues between Bangladesh and India, this policy held back the development of the relations for a significant period, particularly with regard to finding solutions to issues that are important from the Bangladesh perspective.

Relations with India is a sensitive, as well as highly political, issue. Being non-partisan, the present caretaker government has certain advantages in this regard. The first step of this government was to reinstate regular dialogue with the Indian government at various levels in important areas.

India also took the opportunity of befriending the new Bangladesh government. The first meeting of the head of the caretaker government, Fakhruddin Ahmed, with Indian premier Manmohan Singh took place on the sidelines of the 14th Saarc Summit in Delhi in April 2007.

This was followed by several reciprocal visits by Indian and Bangladeshi foreign ministers and secretaries, which boosted mutual

understanding, giving a firm footing for improved relations.

There has also been a revitalisation of military cooperation, with visits of top military officials from the two countries. Bangladeshi army chief General Moeen U. Ahmed's visit to India in February was followed by the visit of Indian army chief General Deepak Kapoor in July.

The last visit by an Indian army chief to Bangladesh was way back in 2000. Indian war veterans, who fought during Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971, were invited to participate in the Bangladesh Independence Day celebrations in March this year. The renewed exchanges and gestures of goodwill will go a long way in forming strategic cooperation between the two armed forces.

The most tangible result of the recent cooperation was the re-establishment of the passenger train service between Kolkata and Dhaka after 43 years. Measures have been undertaken to reduce the \$2 billion trade gap, which is heavily tilted towards India. India allowed duty-free import of 8 million pieces of RMGs from Bangladesh last year.

More Bangladeshi products are expected to enter the Indian mar-

ket at reduced tariff rates. India also agreed to consider relaxing standardisation requirements for Bangladeshi products.

In the aftermath of devastating Cyclone Sidr that hit Bangladesh in November 2007, the Indian government showed sincere empathy, providing emergency relief as well as rehabilitation support.

The Indian government also announced that it would export 500,000 tons of rice at a reduced price to Bangladesh, in spite of a ban on rice export. However, until now, only a small part has been delivered. India also pledged to rebuild 10 affected coastal villages.

Despite the progress made in these areas, border management and water sharing, both critical from the Bangladesh perspective, remain problematic. Innocent civilians continue to be killed by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF), creating tension in the border areas.

Several incidents of BDR-BSF clashes took place in the last two years, the latest being in July, when two BDR personnel were shot dead by BSF Snuffling, push-in, human trafficking, and illegal movements add on to the already long list of issues that border forces have to deal with.

India is also building a fence along the Indo-Bangla border, spanning over 2,500 miles. In the area of combating terrorism, the level of cooperation is far from satisfactory. Investigation in several bombings in Indian soil

has led to links in Bangladesh. However, no concrete evidence in this regard has been found so far.

India recently handed over a few listed Bangladeshi criminals to our authorities. However, there is still no headway in signing the crucial extradition treaty. Bangladesh has consistently denied that Indian insurgents operate from within its territory and has vowed to cooperate in this matter, particularly in sharing information.

In August, Indian giant Tata declared withdrawal of its \$3 billion investment proposal due to Bangladesh government's delay in taking a final decision and reluctance to ensure uninterrupted gas supply for a 20-year period. This does not bode well for attracting such investments from India in the future.

Connectivity is an important regional issue, and the Saarc leaders in the 14th Summit pledged to improve the air, rail and road transportation with easier visa regime. India has been pushing for a corridor to connect with its north-eastern states through Bangladesh for many years.

However, the transit issue cannot be easily dealt with in Bangladesh because of strong resistance from various quarters. There are many arguments for and against this, and the political, infrastructural and economic implications must be carefully assessed before any decisions are made. It is highly unlikely that the present caretaker government will take a position in this regard.

The issues must also be dealt in a package with the issue of granting Bangladesh transit to Nepal. India has also urged Bangladesh to allow use of the Chittagong port, particularly for its north-eastern states. However, this also cannot be decided upon without a thorough assessment.

India is rapidly emerging as an economic powerhouse, and in the next 50 years will have one of the world's biggest economies. Bangladesh remains at the threshold of this economic boom, with the opportunity to cash in on the Indian as well as Chinese economic boom.

This can only be achieved with far-sighted strategic outlook and sound policies. It is time to look beyond the narrow political views in coming up with pragmatic policies befitting the new world order.

For Bangladesh, good relations with India are crucial in terms of strategic, economic, and geopolitical perspectives. It is an undeniable fact that the sooner we realise and work towards this the better it will be for the country's future.

On the other hand, India must avoid its hegemonistic approach to Bangladesh, and accord due significance to its neighbour in the interest of regional stability, balanced growth and the shared vision of a resurgent new South Asia.

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North Korean sports cheat set to lose more than reputation

A sportsman called Kim Jong Su was caught using drugs at the Beijing Olympics. That's bad enough -- but the really scary news is that he was a North Korean. Can you imagine what they'll do to him?

"If you humiliate the country like Kim Jong Su did, you will be secretly dragged somewhere and suffer," an unnamed source from inside the country told the Daily DK online newspaper.

This reminded me of my primary teacher, who was always dragging students away to suffer. She practiced an educational technique called death-threat-centred-learning. In the event, our class did every test badly, although I suspect we were top performers in bedwetting.

The only good news for Kim Jong Su is that he may not be humiliated in his own country: North Korean citizens get almost no Olympic coverage, unless one of their countrymen wins something. When that happens, the people rejoice, and so do the country's rocks, trees and lakes.

When Dear Leader Kim Jong Il did an international tour, nature expressed its pleasure with a series of miraculous signs. A 20-metre high water spout erupted spontaneously from a lake, surrounded by a magical display of rainbows, the Korea Central News Agency reported.

It's a pity there isn't an Olympic prize for Synchronised Silliness: North Korea would get the gold.

Meanwhile, their cousins in South Korea should get an Olympic prize for fishing. In 1999, a South Korean fisherman, tugging at his net, realised he'd caught a big one. It turned out to be a Chinese spy submarine, the Korea Times reported.

On another occasion, a fisherman caught an entire North Korean vessel full of spies. No one can say fishing in South Korea is boring.

Meanwhile, thank you to reader Mindee Hansen, the first of an untimely people to inform me that a typhoon carrying my name has caused havoc in East Asia. One sent me a headline saying "Nuri leaves a trail of death and destruction" which is word-for-word what my fifth year

school report said.

Mindee's email reminded me that my name is also being carried by a factory in Mongolia producing toilet paper (I'm so proud). In an advertisement about the factory from the *Mongolian Daily News*, originally sent to me by reader Alan Saunders, the Nuri toilet paper factory boasts that it is "Equipped with Republic of Korea technology."

Can you imagine trying to impress people by boasting that you're as futuristic as North Korea? What's their next ad campaign? As tropical as Iceland?

But maybe those guys are good at science. Kim Jong Il is known to have an army of 300 suspiciously perfect cheerleaders.

When the squad toured South Korea, even the most staid newspapers carried photographs with headlines such as "Wow, They Sure Are Pretty." Did he grow them from test tubes or what?

North Korea is known for its innovative, creative methods of asexual reproduction, such as kidnapping citizens from neighbouring countries.

Incidentally, you can now get British beer in the hermit kingdom. Kim Jong Il bought an entire 175-year-old brewery from the UK and had it rebuilt in his homeland.

There's even talk of filling Kim Jong-Il's country with British-style pubs. So one day, North Koreans could be standing around in old buildings, drinking warm, flat beer and eating bad food.

So, no change there.

Bills for damage by Typhoon Nuri should be sent to: www.vittachi.com.



So what if he were Muslim?

Asked how they hoped to counter efforts linking Obama to Islam, Valerie Jarrett, a top Obama adviser, replied, "We continue to talk about his Christian faith." The problem is that such an approach implicitly accepts the necessity of distancing Obama from Islam -- as opposed to making the arguably more prototypically American point that one's religion is one's business, that no candidate should be subjected to tests of religious faith as long as that candidate believes in separating faith from governance.

ELLIS COSE

ONCE Barack Obama emerged as the Democratic candidate, it was clear the presidential contest would become a referendum on race. It was not, however, supposed to be a journey into the terrain of religious fears and prejudice.

But because many Americans think Obama is not what he actually is, it has become that. Beneath the candidate's Christian exterior, they suspect, beats the heart of a Muslim.

Obama has tried vigorously to rebut those suspicions, but they now seem stronger than ever. Between March and July, reports the Pew Research Center, the percentage of people who believe Obama is Muslim increased from 10 to 12 percent.

Of course, even if he were a Muslim, that should be no big deal. In a country that officially separates church and state, a man's

religious beliefs are his own affair. Still, nearly half a century after John F. Kennedy became America's first (and, thus far, only) Roman Catholic president, we haven't fully accepted the notion that all religions should have equal access to the Oval Office.

At the start of the political season, when Mitt Romney seemed to have a shot at the Republican nomination, pollsters sought to determine whether his Mormonism might hurt him. Nearly a third of voters, they found, were less likely to support a Mormon. But some 45 percent were wary of Muslim candidates.

For Obama, that is a potential problem -- particularly in a race that shows ever more signs of being extremely close. Obama has accused his antagonists of fear-mongering. Professing indignation, John McCain's campaign manager accused Obama of playing "the race card."

It's not clear that Obama was playing any such card -- certainly

not to the extent that the McCain camp was in trying to make a racial issue out of what arguably was not.

Instead, Obama seemed to be expressing frustration with a real phenomenon: the attempt by enemies -- not necessarily McCain himself -- to turn him into something frightful.

And what is more frightening, in this post-9/11 age, than the face of radical Islam?

Obama does have some Muslim roots. His father was once a practicing Muslim then, apparently, became disenchanted with the religion.

But the genesis of the current misconception lies less with Obama's history than with what is, in effect, a disinformation campaign.

Ever since his entry into the race, a viral (and false) e-mail has been painting Obama as the product of the radical branch of Islam "that created the Muslim terrorists who are now waging Jihad on the industrialized world." For many voters, Obama's admittedly foreign back-

ground makes the claim plausible.

The campaign has been ramped up another notch. In a newly released book, author Jerome Corsi (who coauthored the anti-John Kerry "Swift Boat" attack of 2004) makes Obama out to be a one-time Muslim who likely took up Christianity for purely political reasons.

Floyd Brown, who claims credit for the Willie Horton ad of 1988, has also written an anti-Obama book, linking him to "anti-Semitic people" and Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan.

The assumption is that to the extent Obama can be made out to be a Muslim, his presidential prospects will wither. It is an assumption that Ibrahim Hooper, national communications director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, finds troubling.

"It's strange to acknowledge that calling someone a Muslim is a smear," he says. He added that CAIR and others had been urging Obama to "speak out forcefully against the anti-Muslim bigotry at the core of this smear."

Since certain Muslims see America as Satan, some Americans consider it perfectly acceptable to be anti-Muslim. So though the rules of civilised engagement prohibit Obama's enemies from making a big deal of his race, many feel comfortable linking him to a



This man is a closet Muslim?

religion that is not his own in the hopes of triggering anti-Islamic (and other associated) anxieties. They can then claim, somewhat disingenuously, that they are not exploiting bigotry -- at least not "racial" bigotry.

Asked how they hoped to counter efforts linking Obama to Islam, Valerie Jarrett, a top Obama adviser, replied, "We continue to talk about his Christian faith." The problem is that such an approach implicitly accepts the necessity of distancing Obama from Islam -- as opposed to making the arguably more prototypically American

point that one's religion is one's business, that no candidate should be subjected to tests of religious faith as long as that candidate believes in separating faith from governance.

Is there any bright side to the Obama-Muslim controversy? Hooper sees one. It "raised the issue of Islamophobia and allows it to be acknowledged and openly discussed."

Certainly, there should be room for an intelligent discussion of religious bigotry -- of whether religion actually makes a difference in how one governs, and of whether America's growing religious diversity will somehow change the political character of this nation.

That discussion will not take place in the context of a political campaign, when the object is not elucidation but the taking down of an opponent. And it will not be given much attention at a convention, where the task is presenting the candidate in the most broadly appealing way.

But at some point, these are issues thoughtful people will need to face head-on -- rather than cede the ground to propagandists who traffic in intolerance, and who, deprived of the ability to make racial slurs with impunity, simply shift their focus to religion.

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