

Prospective dialogue between EC and political parties

Concrete results expected

THE Election Commission has invited 16 political parties to talks between September 6 and 9 on the agenda of party registration with EC. We call upon the political parties to respond to the invitation positively.

The roadblock for BNP's participation in the talks seems to have been removed following Acting Secretary General Delwar Hossain's meeting with his party chief Begum Khaleda Zia in the sub-jail and EC's invitation to him for talks as the legitimate representative of the party. The AL, the other major party, has had two rounds of talks and is preparing itself for the third round.

This initiative on the part of the EC to have dialogue with political parties is set against a compelling background. The elections are only a few months away and so much is on the table to be settled and implemented to ensure free, fair and credible elections through basic reforms.

What is pivotal to the reform agenda is the registration of political parties. Our clear position is that the political parties must register themselves with the EC without any waffling. When people of all other avocations need a licence to operate why political parties should not register themselves to operate within a legal framework? They are voted by the people to represent them, legislate and exercise power on their behalf and lead the country for five years; they would perform such lofty functions and enjoy all the privileges that go with their position without fulfilling the rudimentary requirement of registration with the EC. The parties want to have the cake and eat it too, something that is unacceptable.

As for the RPO, the contents of it had been mooted by members of civil society and political parties since a long time back. The form in which it has come about is reflective of public opinion. The fact remains though, the EC and the government have taken too long a time to bring about the required ordinance. We share the political parties concern for the time constraints in adapting to the provisions. There may be practical problems for the political parties in implementing the provisions. For instance, these call for changes in the party constitution which in turn require going through various committees before adoption through the council. This can at best present a procedural problem. That is not insurmountable, if there is a will.

Price rise during Ramadan

The measures that need to be taken

WITH the Ramadan only a couple of days away, prices of essential commodities have begun to go up. There is too the fear that they will further go up in the course of the month. In other words, citizens now find themselves in a situation where their backs are pressed hard against the wall.

In such circumstances, the authorities must go for steps that will prevent the crisis from worsening. This can be done through engaging the business community more intensely, specifically because the latter has taken upon itself the responsibility of monitoring market prices. Obviously, if businessmen are willing to do that job, nothing could be better. It now remains to be seen how they do it. What has been made patent in these past many months is that any external surveillance of the market, particularly through a deployment of law-enforcing agencies, leads to panic among traders. Such a fear psychosis does not bode well for smooth market operations. An important aspect of the problem is the need for good, purposeful coordination between retailers and wholesalers.

In the broad sense, conditions in the market, both during Ramadan and outside it, must be regulated through decisions made on a data-based approach. That will mean making accurate assessments relating to demands for the supply of goods to the markets to square up with the former. In turn, it will mean keeping the supply chain going through efficient procurement and transportation of goods. Such an approach to dealing with prices will smoothen the process of uninterrupted distribution, which logically should then prevent any rise in prices. But of significance is the question of how practicable the idea will be, given the tendency of the traders to go for a hike in prices on flimsy pretexts. One hardly needs emphasising the crunch citizens have been going through in the market. One also remains aware of how eagerly dishonest traders are looking to Ramadan to add to their coffers. They should be ethical enough to spread their profits thin rather than making a windfall. The business community must now be called upon to fulfill its promise of monitoring prices -- and keeping them under control.

Big fish vs. small fish



ABDUL BAYES

COMPARE two former prime ministers of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina (1996-2001) and Begum Khaleda Zia (2001-2006). Hasina is the daughter of the father of the nation while Khaleda is the wife of a former president and famous freedom fighter. Khaleda Zia owns two palacious houses (gift from government) in the posh areas of Dhaka city. Hasina lives in her husband's house. The nation is so "grateful" to the father of the nation that his two surviving daughters remain homeless! I expected that the current CTG would provide a level playing field by providing Hasina and Rehana with two houses in Dhaka as a token of respect to the late father of the nation. Till now that did not happen.

However, Bangladesh emerged as a basket case of corruption (champions in corruption five times consecutively) during Khaleda's tenure.

BENEATH THE SURFACE
Initially, the drive won the hearts of the millions as they want an end to corruption. But people also want that a non-discriminatory and lawful course of action be followed for this. Adversely or inadvertently, the whole drive is now facing a serious question: would it help or hinder corruption in Bangladesh? As it appears, when corrupt tycoons are coming out of jails -- due to procedural mistakes or political maneuvering -- suffice it so that our dream of a corruption-free society would likely be dashed.

That is not to deny that there was corruption during Haisna's tenure, but much less in magnitude compared to that of Khaleda's. If one looks at the average amount of wealth amassed and concealed by the respective politicians of the two big parties and disclosed in media, one could clearly see the difference.

Besides this, family members and relatives of Khaleda Zia -- especially her two sons and two brothers -- are alleged to have amassed and laundered huge amounts of wealth. Even government spokesmen admitted that. The general belief is that Zia family and their followers have pocketed about one-fourth of our GDP during 2001 and 2006 period. Also on the air is the story that all that went to win the 2006 general election by hook or by crook was to protect the wealth of the "Marcos dynasty" of Bangladesh.

If a government wants to

enquire into the wealth of the former PMs, who should be caught first, Khaleda or Hasina? Surely, it is Khaleda Zia because of the three most important factors: she is the most recent former PM, Bangladesh bagged five "gold medals" in corruption during her tenure, and popular and media perceptions are that her family members through Hawa Bhaban amassed huge wealth.

Unfortunately, and surprising us all, just the reverse happened. Among the two former PMs, the anti-corruption drive started with Hasina. She was not allowed to re-enter the country on the ground that she amassed huge amount of wealth. Hasina decided to defend her case of engaging in corruption but her defense was also denied. Anyway, the eroding image of the government and international pressure paved her way home.

Once back in the country, a barrage of cases were built to put her behind bars. The anti-

corruption drive was seemingly turned into an "anti-Hasina" drive -- the drive against a person who served as PM long before this government and ACC (the current structure) came into place. It is, as if this was the "price" Hasina and her party had to pay for the movements marshaled against misdeeds of the past governments and the subsequent establishment of the present setup of governance.

At a much later stage, and possibly to put up a so-called level-playing field, Khaleda had to face the fire. But what strikes us all is the fact that Hasina was charge-sheeted in a number of cases, appeared several times before the court with deteriorating health condition. On the other hand, not a single charge-sheet could be made against Khaleda Zia. What about Tarique Rahman? Not a single charge sheet so far. Both of them were granted bails by the hon'ble High Court, and, hopefully, they will be released soon.

Lists after lists of corrupt persons were published and fed to the press. This is unfortunate because a person cannot be called corrupt unless proved by the court. In one such big list, appeared the names of the business tycoons, bureaucrats, and media owners. The anti-corruption drive that marched so mercilessly suddenly stalled and a concept of "truth commission" was invoked. What is that? The commission is to pardon all "good boys" who will speak the truth after passing through a long life of telling lies. Why should they be pardoned? Because, we are told, they are the backbone of the economy. The arguments are well placed but public perception is that some of these "good boys" are linked to the power structure ruling the country now. Otherwise, why should not the same path of pardoning be pursued for others.

Now comes the final "sermon." For ensuring a free and fair election and for enabling participation of all parties, the government has to accommodate by relaxing the tight rope round the politicians' necks. These "sermons" are now being circulated by government-backed media mongers and the so-called civil society members. The million dollar question is, if corruption has to be compromised for the sake of a general election, then why this farce for

such a long time, depriving people of their due rights?

The above mentioned few conflicting episodes are just tip of the ice-berg. One could come up with a number of anomalies to argue that, sordidly, the whole anti-corruption drive turned into an anti-politics drive over time. Initially, the drive won the hearts of the millions as they want an end to corruption. But people also want that a non-discriminatory and lawful course of action be followed for this. Adversely or inadvertently, the whole drive is now facing a serious question: would it help or hinder corruption in Bangladesh? As it appears, when corrupt tycoons are coming out of jails -- due to procedural mistakes or political maneuvering -- suffice it so that our dream of a corruption-free society would likely be dashed.

One of the advisers of CTG once remarked: We have not come to catch small fish but big fish (amra chunuputi dhorte ashina, amra rui katla dhorte ashini). To our utter dismay, we are forced to observe that chunuputis are in jail while rui katlas are swimming in the sweet waters of their swimming pools built from corrupt money. Bangladesh is surely a test case of treacherous paths of politics!

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Presidential election in Pakistan



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

THE presidential election in Pakistan scheduled for September 6 should be of great interest to all South Asian nations because political stability in Pakistan is vital for the politico-economic development of this region.

Though President Musharraf had seemingly given the impression that he was integral to the so-called war on terror, and therefore to the interests of the US and the West, his departure, sought by the people of Pakistan, demonstrated to the West that they could not fight an effective war on terror without the support of the people. And the people of Pakistan reposed their trust in their elected representatives through the elections to parliament and the provincial assemblies held in February.

In the civilisation of Pakistani politics, Asif Ali Zardari played a crucial role, in conjunction with his wife, the assassinated former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, along with Pakistan Muslim

GOING DEEPER

Asif Zardari along with Nawaz Sharif and Asfandiyar Wali Khan have to be credited for the transformation of Pakistan, ruled by the military for most of the time since its birth in 1947 and described in the Western press as on the way of becoming a failed state or "the most dangerous country in the world" to a democratic country.

League (N) of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Awami National Party of Asfandiyar Wali Khan, assisted by the movement of the lawyers, civil society, and the people. In this transformation of Pakistani politics, MQM and Jamaat-e-Islami of Maulana Fazlur Rahman, who had benefited during the rule of General Musharraf, were also co-participants.

Other things remaining the same, Zardari's election as president appears to be very likely, despite candidates fielded by PML(N) and PML(Q), because PPP and its allies have the requisite number of votes in parliament and in the provincial assemblies that constitute the electorate for the presidential election.

Asif Zardari, who had spent 11 out of the past 22 years in prison fighting corruption allegations, has shown remarkable political ingenuity in banding together the political parties for the February elections and thereafter in effecting the departure of General Musharraf from the

Pakistani political scene. On the February elections, William Dalrymple (The New York Review of Books) wrote: "To widespread surprise, the elections in Pakistan were free and fair; and Pakistanis voted heavily in favor of liberal centrist parties opposed to both the mullahs and the army. Here, in a country normally held up in the more Islamophobic right-wing press of Western countries as the epitome of 'what went wrong' in the Islamic world, a popular election resulted in an unequivocal vote for moderate, secular democracy."

In the elections MMA, the combine of six Islamist political parties, who had won about 12% of the votes and had 56 members in parliament after the 2002 elections, thanks to their closeness to then military government, won only five parliamentary seats in the February 2008 elections and was comprehensively defeated by the overtly secular ANP in the NWFP led by the grandson of legendary ally of Mahatma Gandhi, Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan.

ANP victory demonstrated that, contrary to their image as bearded bastions of Islamist orthodoxy, Pashtun tribesmen are as weary as anyone else of violence, extremism and instability.

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It is intriguing that coinciding with the withdrawal of PML(N) from the coalition, the Financial Times revealed medical reports of March 2007 diagnosing Asif Zardari with dementia, major depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, raising questions about his ability to guide the destiny of Pakistan.

Such vilification was deplored by parliament member Farhanaz Ispahani, spokesperson of Zardari House, as a relic of the era of dictatorship and personal

destruction: "It is a part of Pakistan's past but certainly not its future."

Subsequent medical report had declared him to be "medically fit to run for political office and free of any symptoms." The earlier reports have to be seen in the light of Zardari's long incarceration and his fear of being killed while in captivity. Zardari had shown remarkable fortitude after the assassination of Benazir Bhutto by holding together himself and his children as well as leading the PPP to election victories in parliamentary and provincial assembly polls.

Opposed to General Musharraf's choice of nursing various Islamist guerrilla armies back to health in order to continue to use them against India while pursuing the so-called war on terror the PPP-led coalition government in Islamabad has banned the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) under the Anti-Terrorism Act "for several suicide attacks, including the fresh twin blasts outside the Pakistan Ordnance Factory at Wah killing at least 78 people."

The emergence and consolidation of Pakistani Taliban in the FATA happened when the Pakistani forces were fighting the "foreign" Taliban elements, and in the process ignored the transition of the indigenous elements from Taliban sympathisers to a force fully

subscribing to the Taliban ideology.

A political commentator wrote in an article that: "During this process (of Pakistani forces fighting foreign terrorists) the Pakistani Taliban effectively established themselves as an alternative leadership to the traditional tribal elders. By the time the Pakistani government realized the changing dynamics and tried to resurrect the tribal jirga institution, it was too late. The Taliban had killed approximately 200 of the tribal elders under charges of being Pakistani or American spies." The disparate Taliban elements banded together in December last year under the banner of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

Asif Zardari's apology to Nawaz Sharif for the hurt caused to him and his request to Sharif to set aside personal differences and to return to the coalition "in the interest of democracy and Pakistan" is timely and is expected, if reciprocated by PML (N), would help solve political crisis and strengthen the fragile democracy in Pakistan. It remains to be seen whether Nawaz Sharif would bury the hatchet and join hands with Asif Zardari and other liberal democrats to put Pakistan back on an irreversible path towards democracy and development.

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Obama's soaring speech and McCain's surprise pick

LETTER FROM AMERICA

In front of 85,000 adoring fans in the Mile High Stadium in Denver, Colorado, Obama defined for America in specific terms the "change" he wants to usher in. Reciting a litany of Bush-McCain failures over the last eight years, Obama thundered: "Enough!"

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

HOW many superlative speeches does an orator have in him? If you are Brutus, Antony or Barack Obama, too many to count! Forty-five years to the day the slain civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his magnificent "I have a Dream Speech" in front of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, in what experts dubbed the greatest acceptance speech in the history of American political conventions, on August 28, Barack Obama matched King and wowed America once again!

Obama's speech has been labeled a symphony. With 38 million Americans watching -- more than those who watched

the Beijing Olympic opening ceremony, more than the audience for the American Idol finale -- Obama, the Mozart, threw nineteen unanswered punches in the form of musical notes at his Salieri, John McCain.

In front of 85,000 adoring fans in the Mile High Stadium in Denver, Colorado, Obama defined for America in specific terms the "change" he wants to usher in. Reciting a litany of Bush-McCain failures over the last eight years, Obama thundered: "Enough!"

Confronting McCain head-on, Obama reminded listeners that McCain "does not know the suffering of the American people" and suggested that as someone who defined middle class as "someone worth less than 5

million dollars," that McCain simply "does not get it."

Taking dead aim at McCain's supposed strength, foreign policy and national security, Obama challenged McCain to debate the issue. The party of Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy does not have to be told how to defend America, he told McCain. Answering a McCain ad, Obama chastised McCain: "I've got news for you, Mr. McCain, every American 'puts America first.'"

Observers were surprised at the ferocity of Obama's attack on McCain, much to the delirious delight of his supporters. Democrats are fed up with their previous candidates, Michael Dukakis (1988), Al Gore (2000) and John Kerry (2004) for taking

the moral high road to defeat, while the Republicans adopted the Karl Rovean low road to victory. They began having serious doubts whether Obama had the stomach to fight back. Americans detest a candidate who does not fight back when attacked.

Even staunch Republicans were stunned by Obama's uncharacteristic aggression towards McCain. Many Republicans described the speech as "manly." The challenge for Obama is to keep it up. McCain has been brutalising Obama with negative commercials over the last six weeks. McCain ads bombarded Americans with the message: "He does not have the experience to be the commander-in-chief." In the absence of credible rebuttal from Obama campaign, Americans were beginning to believe the ad. At least for now, the bleeding has been stopped.

The McCain campaign did not allow Obama to bask in the glory of his speech. The very next day,

Friday, August 29, McCain announced his VP candidate: Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska! The nation's first reaction was: Sarah who? People of the writer's generation were asking: Is she related to Michael Palin of the British comedy series Monty Python's Flying Circus? (She is not.)

Experts concluded that it was a gamble, a gimmick to attract Hillary Clinton's disaffected women supporters. The problem is: Gov. Palin is everything Hillary is not. She wants to ban abortion for all causes all over America, she is a hunter and a supporter of gun rights, and she wants to drill for oil everywhere.

Some women were outraged. "It is an insult to American women to think that just because she has all female body parts, women would flock to vote for her, although she is opposed to key issues women have been fighting for decades." After entreaties from Hillary and Bill Clinton at the Democratic convention, urging Hillary backers to support Obama, there may

not be too many disaffected Hillary supporters to woo any way.

McCain supporters worry that it was an impulsive choice, which does not speak well of McCain's first important decision. McCain had met Palin only once before offering her the VP slot. She has not been vetted thoroughly. In Alaska, she is under investigation for ordering the firing of her brother-in-law, who had divorced her sister.

For the last 18 months, Sarah Palin, 44, has been the governor of a state that has a population of less than Austin, Texas. Previously she was the mayor of a city of 8,000 people. She is on record as saying she is not interested in what is going on in Iraq. Yet, with a straight face John McCain proclaimed Sarah Palin "ready to be president." America has been accepting a lot of dreck from McCain. But, this one may be harder to accept.

Sarah Palin's absolute inexperience in foreign and national security affairs will seriously undercut McCain's effort to

paint Obama as weak in these two areas.

Like Senator McCain's wife Cindy, Sarah Palin is a former beauty contest participant (we now know the kind of women McCain likes). She is extremely conservative and is the darling of the evangelicals. The problem for McCain is this: candidates rally their bases (left for Democrats, right for the Republicans) during the primaries, and then move towards the centre before the election, as Obama is doing.

The Republican base was never very enthusiastic about McCain, who prides himself as a maverick. McCain won the nomination through the support of independents and moderate Republicans. Now he is attempting to energise the Republican base by moving right, thus alienating the moderates and the independents, just before the election; a serious gamble.

Such is the conventional wisdom. But conventional wisdom may not apply here. Barack Obama is not a conven-

tional candidate. Through coded words the McCain campaign has been reminding Americans that Obama is black and as such not patriotic enough, and therefore, cannot be trusted to lead this predominantly white nation. (Fact: Although blacks are 13% of the population, they constitute 30% of the US armed forces and disproportionately die for their country.)

There is an undercurrent of white nationalism that runs through working class white America. Like the wind, it cannot be seen, only felt. They often vote against their own interests. Even though Bush-McCain may have cost them their jobs and houses, out of racial loyalty they will continue to vote for the likes of them, instead of a black man who may restore their jobs and houses to them.

Obama's fate will depend on which way this wind blows.

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