

BNP boycott of talks with EC

A regrettable decision

WE feel that the BNP's decision to turn down the Election Commission's (EC) invitation for talks is injudicious, and given the current situation, regrettable. Subsequent to BNP's rejection Jamaat has followed suit.

We can understand the BNP's diffidence, and even sympathise with it up to a point for its main segment being left out of the EC's invitation list for the first round of talks. In a way, one must admit, the EC is reaping the bitter harvest of the seeds that it had sown; indeed its decision to invite a faction of the BNP led by Maj. Hafeez (Retd), for the first round of talks, was most ill-advised, and we had pointed out the folly in this column in the past.

But the CEC has since apologised for the mistake, and has in a way signalled his open mind by expanding the agenda for talks with the BNP beyond the RPO, in their latest communication with the party. This should allay any misgivings about the EC that might have arisen in the BNP.

Under these circumstances we feel that the BNP's decision, not to sit for dialogue with the EC, would be shortsighted and against its interest. If Delwar does not respond positively to EC's invitation it would be a fair guess that the BNP, perhaps feeling that the EC might be in the back foot now, would like to dictate its own term and extract the maximum political advantage from the EC as a part of its broader election strategy.

We should not forget that 1/11 was brought about because of the intransigence of the major parties on important issues as well as their propensity to create, rather than remove, the roadblocks to the political process. Their unwillingness to listen to the views of others and reluctance to resolve issues through discussion across the table, had exacerbated the situation. That attitude we cannot condone.

We feel the EC has demonstrated a flexible attitude in expanding the scope of discussions. And any reservation that the BNP might have, particularly on the newly promulgated RPO, can be thrashed out across the table with the EC. All differences, reservations and objections must be solved through discussions there is no other alternative.

The people are waiting eagerly for an election and the nation cannot brook anything that would delay the handover of the reins of the government to the elected representatives. And towards that end, we feel, the BNP led 4-party Alliance must play a positive role.

A storm in a teacup...

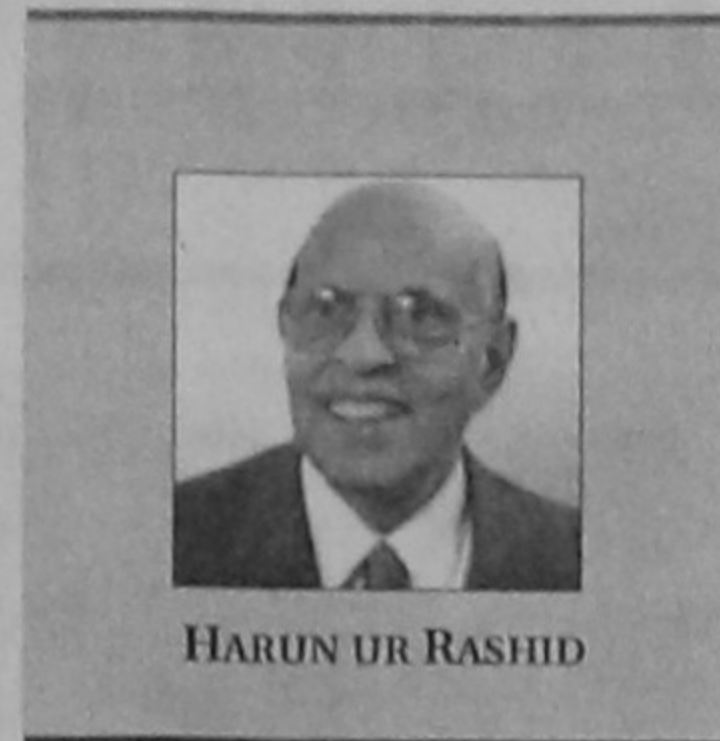
Too much should not be read into it

QUITE a squall has been raised, or so it appears, over the presence of some Awami League politicians at a recent iftar hosted by the Saudi ambassador in Dhaka. The issue, if it is at all an issue, would not be there were not men like Motiur Rahman Nizami of the Jamaat-e-Islami present there as well. Some newspapers carried photographs of the AL's Zillur Rahman shaking hands with Nizami, the implication being that a political party which has been vocal in demanding the trial of the collaborators and war criminals of 1971 has now been caught in an act of hypocrisy by being in the same room with the very men it wants to be tried for crimes committed in 1971.

We at this newspaper look at the entire episode from a social point of view as well as its being a matter of diplomatic courtesy. Simply put, it is a non-issue that some people, including many in the Awami League itself, have been trying to turn into an issue. The fact is that it was an occasion where the Saudi envoy invited the leading figures of the political parties to an iftar party they could not logically refuse or decline to attend. Anyone who now tries to characterise the presence of these politicians at the iftar as a sign of politics getting to be compromised is losing sight of the customs and social mores that such occasions seek to uphold. It was a simple iftar party where the spirit was decidedly of a religious nature. The question of politics being associated the occasion simply did not or does not arise. Indeed, it must be borne in mind that trying to read political meaning into what is purely a religious occasion is clearly to get things not only wrong but also to create unnecessary hype.

As far as we are concerned, there was nothing even remotely suggestive of political overtones at the Saudi envoy's iftar. No principles were turned on their heads and no one lost any moral standing by being there. Let the matter be laid at rest.

Pakistan's new president



HARUN UR RASHID

ON September 6, Asif Ali Zardari won a sweeping victory in Pakistan's presidential election. He is the 14th president of the country. The election was called after former General Pervez Musharraf resigned rather than risk being impeached.

The president is elected by secret ballot in the national and four provincial assemblies. Mr. Zardari won 481 votes out of 702, far more than the 352 votes that would have guaranteed him victory, leaving his two rivals trailing far behind.

In Sindh province, Mr. Zardari won all 65 votes. In NWFP, he got 56 out of the 65 votes. In Balochistan province, he won 59 of the 65 votes. By contrast, he only won 22 out of 65 seats in Punjab province, the heartland of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's PML(N) party.

His election victory represents an extraordinary turnaround for Mr. 10 Percent, as he is known. He spent eight years in jail during President Musharraf's regime and eleven overall. It was Musharraf, though, who released him in 2004

Although for Zardari, this election victory is extraordinary, he will face many political and economic hurdles in running the country of 160 million people. Furthermore, the country is divided on major national issues, and the question is how long the PPP can govern the country until it has to call for a general election to sort out the political mess the major parties have created.

and granted amnesty for corruption charges in 2007 as part of a political haggling between Musharraf and the late Benazir Bhutto.

It is an irony that he has become the president of the country. What hope can the people expect from him, except of large promises, smooth excuses, conspiracy, chicanery and corruption!

How did he manage to win?

Mr. Zardari has been found to be a shrewd politician. He has taken firm control of Bhutto's ruling PPP, leading it to electoral victory in February. Bhutto's will named her 19-year-old son, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, as party chairman and him as co-chairman.

Mr. Zardari, unpopular with his party's rank and file, has wrapped himself in the Bhutto mantle, drawing on the cultish support that stems from Benazir's father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was toppled and hanged by the military in the late 1970s.

He surprisingly outwitted the former prime minister and veteran

BOTTOM LINE

politician Nawaz Sharif in the political game. He engineered a coalition government with Nawaz Sharif and later refused to fulfill pledges to restore all the sacked judges or to reduce the powers of the president, to dissolve the parliament and the assemblies in the provinces.

He is believed to have convinced the Bush administration, through his friend, Afghan-born US ambassador to the UN, Zalmay Khalilzad, that his government needs as much power as possible and that means having his party people as president and prime minister so they can defeat the militants in Pakistan's tribal areas.

He also impressed upon US that it would be counter-productive to reduce the powers of the president under the current political and security environment in the country.

He is believed to have done a deal with the most powerful institution in the country, the army. He assured that his government would protect their interests, taking into account the army's foreign strate-

gic concerns and making sure its share of the national budget is well stocked. The government would ensure a steady supply of aid and equipment from US to meet the army's needs to keep up with India.

He was also able to convince smaller parties that he was the best person to deal with the problems of the less populated provinces, because he belonged to Sindh and not to the Punjab (Nawaz Sharif hails from the Punjab).

He has made sensible efforts for reconciliation in insurgency-hit Balochistan and has forged links with the PPP's former rivals in the troubled NWFP and the MQM, which governs Karachi, Pakistan's largest city.

Challenges

Mr. Zardari faces severe economic problems, including low stock prices, power shortage, inflation, soaring food prices and a rampant Islamist insurgency, that are threatening Pakistan's stability. During the voting, a bomb killed at least 30 people near Peshawar.

Many analysts doubt whether

his government would be able to address economic problems and stamp out militants from Pakistan because his government would be locked in horns with the PML(N) on national issues.

Nawaz Sharif appears more popular with the middle class and lawyers on the question of restoration of all sacked judges, including former chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry. Many analysts say that Sharif could eventually wipe out PPP's majority in the next national parliamentary election.

There is another dimension in Pakistan politics. While the US is believed to have lent strong support to Zardari, Saudi Arabia is believed to provide robust support to Nawaz Sharif. Accordingly, Zardari government would face a longer term all-out battle with Nawaz Sharif, and when two major political parties are at loggerheads, the country's unity is destroyed and nothing moves swiftly.

A weak and beleaguered government normally cannot deliver the desired goods, and in this case that would be stamping out the militants from Pakistan by the US.

Furthermore, majority in Pakistan believe that the so-called "war on terror" has been imposed on Pakistan by US and it is not their war so they have nothing to do with it.

Analysts doubt whether Zardari government would be able to control the powerful ISI from providing support to militants in the Indian-occupied Kashmir and in Afghanistan. The two territories

have become magnets for foreign militants because they see war against Islam in these territories after Iraq. Some say that the militants have moved from Iraq to tribal areas in Pakistan for safe haven.

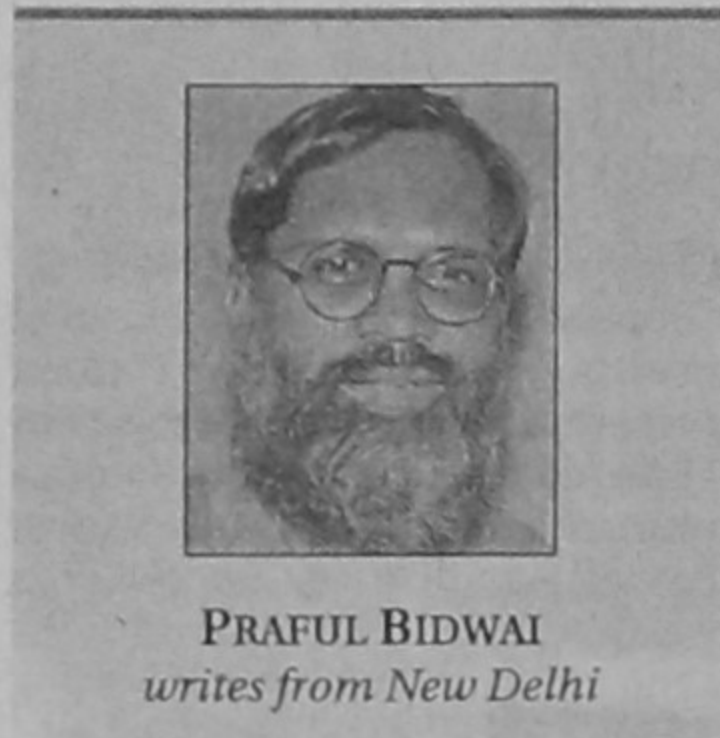
President Karzai of Afghanistan has been well disposed towards India where he was educated. He wants to develop good and strong relations with India with a view to reduce Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan. India has been largely engaged, with more than \$1 billion, in assisting Afghanistan, including the construction of a new parliament building in Kabul.

Karzai has been warning Pakistan not to destabilise his country by sending militants to his country from Pakistan's tribal areas. Pakistan does not want to lose Afghanistan to India as a strategic policy. Pakistan does not want to be sandwiched between India and Afghanistan, which would be perceived as gradually falling under Indian sphere of influence.

Although for Zardari, this election victory is extraordinary, he will face many political and economic hurdles in running the country of 160 million people. Furthermore, the country is divided on major national issues, and the question is how long the PPP can govern the country until it has to call for a general election to sort out the political mess the major parties have created.

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The only way out in Kashmir



PRAFUL BIDWAI
writes from New Delhi

THE PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

I take the view that the right to self-determination isn't absolute, and must be balanced by democracy, pluralism and the rights of "minorities within the minorities." One shouldn't view the present, possibly transitory, mood in Kashmir as unqualified endorsement of azadi, interpreted as a sovereign, independent state or Kashmir's merger with Pakistan.

been involved in the agreement, they wouldn't have been able to blame the government for its flaws. The accusation that it didn't consult all sides to the dispute is potentially opened to exploitation to communal or regionalist ends.

But evidently, Indian policymakers have learnt little from Kashmir's recent history, which shows that such potential will nearly always be exploited. If this continues, turmoil in the Valley could, yet again, become a serious problem, with unpleasant implications for India-Pakistan relations.

In Jammu, the settlement hasn't neutralised the agitators agenda, many allied to the Bharatiya Janata Party. This agenda favours the state's trifurcation into a predominantly Hindu Jammu, a Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley, and a Buddhist Ladakh.

Multiple blunders have brought J&K to this pass, after six years of relative peace. After encouraging the yatra, which led to a 25-fold increase in the pilgrims' number over 20 years, the government extended its duration well beyond

the ice lingam's survival period.

This was seen in the Valley as promoting aggressive Hindutva "nationalism" to counter Kashmiri separatism.

Then, to placate Hindu communal sentiment, the government transferred land to the SASB. It failed to anticipate the Islamic-separatist reaction, and Jammu's more militant counter-reaction to the transfer's cancellation, leading to a blockade in the Valley. It refused to lift the blockade until the Valley's poor crop had perished.

Meanwhile, the Jammu protests turned viciously communal as the BJP fished in troubled waters. Unfortunately, the Congress' Jammu leaders too joined the agitators. Their rough acid-throwing methods drew flak from the rest of India.

The agitators' display of trishuls with the National Flag, espousal of Hindutva, and demoralisation of all Kashmiri Muslims as "anti-national," added to the ferocity of the Valley protests.

In the second week of August, the government cracked down on

them. On August 11, it allowed a lakhs-strong procession to form on the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad highway and fired on it. It deployed double standards: "rubber bullets in Jammu, live bullets in the Valley," where some 40 people were killed.

This only heightened the Valley's alienation from the Indian state and brought extremists like Syed Ali Shah Geelani out of the woodwork.

Indian policymakers deluded themselves that popular alienation had disappeared in the last few years with the return of relative normality: The extremists were isolated. Why, the Hurriyat was about to decide not to demand a boycott of elections!

Better sense prevailed around August 15-18, when the government allowed peaceful protests. Governor NN Vohra ordered that there should be no firing. This helped the Hurriyat's moderate faction adopt softer positions.

Soon, however, National Security Adviser M.K. Narayanan intervened. He criticised Mr. Vohra for his "soft line" and engineered

the massive crackdown of August 24-25. Nine districts were handed over to the army, newspapers banned, TV channels closed, and mobile-telephone SMS services disabled.

This cost of the Indian state was a massive loss of legitimacy. Yet, says Yusuf Tarigami, a widely respected Communist Party of India (Marxist) MLA: "Mercifully, popular alienation isn't as severe as in the early 1990s, and may prove transient."

In the post-1989 climate, armed groups, including the indigenous Hizbul Mujahideen, hyperactively demanded Kashmir's separation. They subdued the moderate Hurriyat. Pakistan armed them, and lent them logistical support. Savage repression by Indian forces helped them build a base.

Militant groups can no longer recruit in the Valley. Kashmir has been a live political issue in Pakistan since the peace process with India started. It still isn't. The most noticeable difference from the past is the bitterness and anger among the youth, who grew up amidst violence, humiliation and hatred in the 1990s. Yet, it isn't too late to rescue the situation.

I take the view that the right to self-determination isn't absolute, and must be balanced by democracy, pluralism and the rights of "minorities within the minorities." One shouldn't view the present, possibly transitory, mood in Kashmir as unqualified endorsement of azadi, interpreted as a sovereign, independent state or

Kashmir's merger with Pakistan.

Yet, business-as-usual is not an option in J&K. Hardliners, like Mr. Narayanan, indulge in dangerous self-delusion when they declare that Kashmir will become normal "in 10 days' time," presumably without a pro-reconciliation initiative.

They underestimate the seriousness of Kashmiri alienation and disgust with the overwhelming presence of Indian security forces.

The Indian state must radically-rethink Kashmir and reach out to its people with the up-front offer of a dialogue and autonomy. The dialogue must also include pro-azadi extremists.

For a fruitful dialogue, four things are essential. First, opening of the border with Pakistani Kashmir. This will facilitate trade and people-to-people exchanges, and also allow the Valley Kashmiris to critically evaluate the quality of life and politics in "Azad Kashmir."

Second, strengthening Kashmir's special status under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which has been greatly diluted.

Third, discussion of the regional/interregional autonomy proposals made 10 years ago by the Balraj Puri committee. And finally, thinning out the presence of security forces in the Valley.

The Indian state must courageously take these steps to build confidence among the Kashmiris. Or, the Kashmir problem could soon become intractable.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

After Beijing

For years now the Olympics have acted as a safety net for the juggling act China's ruling party is constantly engaged in. The post-Olympic aporia that the country is likely to experience spells higher risks with less than predictable outcomes. Expect some furrowed brows in Zhongnanhai.

PALLAVI AIYAR

FOR seven years the Beijing Olympics have provided the over-arching umbrella under which Chinese authorities have sheltered while pushing through some of the most sweeping transformations of a society the world has seen.

With traditional beliefs like Confucianism having been battered by decades of communist struggle and in turn socialism's egalitarian ideals punctured by an increasingly single-minded pursuit of mammon, Olympianism -- the elevation of the Games to semi-sacred status to serve a variety of political ends has emerged as China's new credo, its holy cow.

The Games have functioned as a rudder for state policy, helped justify unpopular decisions, shored up the ruling communist party's legitimacy and rallied the nation behind the quest for international prestige and acknowl-

edgement.

The Chinese Communist Party has officially acknowledged that even Chairman Mao was 30% wrong in his actions, but the Olympics have been deemed 100% right.

Since the time of the Roman Empire, large sporting events have served an important function, helping to create a sense of common belonging and pride amongst citizens. In China, the authorities have used the Olympics to create a nationalist glue that cuts across social divides and provides a sense of commonality at a time when traditional social moorings became unhinged by vertiginous development.

All of this begs the question: What will fill the Olympic-sized void once the Games end? Neither the World Expo in Shanghai nor the Guangzhou Asian Games, both scheduled for 2010, have the same rallying power to mobilise a nation. For the Chinese leadership, this is

an issue that presents the need for some tightrope walking that even the skilled policy acrobatics of Beijing's top apparatchiks will find testing.

Animal-rights activists talked of how the Games would transform Chinese attitudes to dogs away from viewing them as food and towards coddling them as man's best friend. Stock-market analysts pointed to the economic buoyancy generated by the Olympics as the basis for bullish predictions, while taxi drivers grappled with English textbooks, determined to master their ABC's in time to welcome "foreign friends" in August 2008.

My six years of stay at Beijing was mauled by cranes and bulldozers, with large swathes of the ancient city smashed and rebuilt anew. The sparkling facades that emerged from the ashes of the old city not only sent a clear message about China's particular vision of modernity, but in severing all physical linkages with the past, they erased

the city's collective memory.

This was a phenomenon that helped sublimate the as-yet-unresolved wounds of recent history -- including the emotional and physical devastation unleashed by Mao's Cultural Revolution -- while focusing attention on a future ostensibly as bright as the dazzling Bird's Nest stadium.

Hundreds of thousands of people were dislocated in the process. Some protested, but many others accepted their lot as necessary for the "New Beijing" that the Olympics would unveil.

The Games were projected as a stage upon which Beijing was to be recast architecturally and even temperamentally. New museums and subway lines, a make-over for the zoo and a ravishing airport terminal, were all pressed into the service of the creation of the "New Beijing, New Olympics."

With their promise of bringing massive "face" to the country, the Games fed the flames of nationalism with considerable success, building confidence in the Communist Party's ability to deliver international recognition in the eyes of its domestic constituency. They also served as a powerful pretext for stilling dissent.

If all the necessary accommodation, on occasion painful, to ensure

a successful Olympics was deemed and accepted as patriotic, then those who questioned their value were of definition traitorous.

The utility of the Olympics to the Chinese authorities was illustrated by the manner in which the Games were used to distract from and silence criticism of the shoddy construction and deep-rooted corruption revealed in the aftermath of May's devastating earthquake in Sichuan province.

In several of the cities hardest hit by the earthquake re-enactments of the Olympic Torch Relay were organised. The idea, according to local media, reports was to use "the Olympic spirit in schools to aid recovery."

Explicit statements equating the "Olympic spirit" with that of "the spirit of conquering disaster" or endurance and forbearance were made.

In many ways this strategy worked. Following decades of famine, war and revolutionary excess, hosting the Olympic Games was seen by significant numbers of Chinese as the moment when their country could finally hold its head up high to receive gold medal after medal.

Various short-term inconveniences were put up with without much protest including electricity

shortages in neighboring provinces, temporary economic losses suffered by businesses ordered shut during the Games, the clearing away of brothels and other "unsuitable" venues, and so on.

The idea that certain sacrifices were both necessary and worthwhile achieved a degree of popular currency. These "adjustments" included fundamental changes such as the creation of a capital city in which many long-term residents found themselves symbolically and physically cast out to the fringes. New Beijing did not have space or patience for poverty.

As the Olympics euphoria comes to an end, bringing with it closure to the seven-year-long hype around the event, both short and long-term contradictions swept under the carpet of the Games will find themselves rudely uncovered. Along with the inevitable anticlimactic feeling that accompanies the end of any big party, the close of the Olympics will open a void.

From environmental degradation to the country's badly tattered social-security fabric, the challenges confronting China today are hard ones for authorities to fit into the nationalistic discourse the Games had laced so well with. An

aging demographic, health-care reform, inflation and corruption are issues that will become easier to hear without the overwhelming noise generated by the clarion call of the Olympics.

As a long-term resident of Beijing, the end of the Games has left even me with a sense of hollowness. After weeks of yelling "Zhonggou Jia You," or Come on! China, as Chinese athletes won medal upon medal, there's a desire to continue cheering, but no victories to cheer for.

I wonder what will unite the country in the absence of the Games. What will distract from internal divisions and emergent tensions? Historically sporting spectacles have only been matched by small wars as diversionary tactics. The likelihood of China taking that course in the near future is minute.

The next few years will be crucial in determining how fragile or resilient the current regime in China really is. Faced with rising labor costs, an economy that is increasingly intertwined with the outside world, and growing pressure on resources from water to oil, China will need to devise new strategies to transform its economic model, if it is to continue to grow at the double-digit rate of the

last decade.

With the end of the Games, Olympianism's greatest failure -- its overwhelming emphasis on unity to the exclusion of legitimate differences -- will also no longer be as easy to obfuscate. Discontentment against Beijing's rule in Tibet and Xinjiang which took centre-stage for a while in the run up to the Olympics will re-emerge as formidable challenges for the authorities.

Without the Games and their prestige to drive home the necessity of "harmony" at any cost, China's ruling party will have to confront its greatest Achilles heel -- its inability to admit to the existence of real diversity and dissent -- head on.

For years now the Olympics have acted as a safety net for the juggling act China's ruling party is constantly engaged in. The post-Olympic aporia that the country is likely to experience spells higher risks with less than predictable outcomes. Expect some furrowed brows in Zhongnanhai.

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