

The parley between the two ladies

The government now wants Sheikh Hasina to sit with Begum Zia and sort things out. But what is really there for Sheikh Hasina to sort out with Begum Zia? To tell her: Yes, I will forget what you did to me and to my party in the last five years of your rule? Yes, my party will not go for hartal or any sort of movement, even if you go to power by manipulation of election and repeat what you did in the past?

HUSAIN IMAM

HAT'S off to the endless energy of the military-backed caretaker government of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed. After carrying out one after another futile exercise with politics -- minus two, king's party, national government, government of national unity, political reform, to name a few -- they seem to have still enough energy to undertake some more. They are now planning to have the two ladies, Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, sit face to face and sort out the things. I wish them all success.

But before we discuss the possibility of such a meeting, and, if the meeting at all takes place, what

could be the outcome of it, let us have a quick glance at the things that have occurred before and after 1/11.

The government of 4-party alliance unleashed a reign of terror and embarked upon a policy of elimination of its opponents, the AL and its supporters to be specific, from the day it assumed office following the election held in October 2001.

They filed false and fabricated cases against hundreds of Awami League leaders and workers, put them behind bars, or kept them on the run. The armed cadres of their party grabbed property of the minority communities, burnt their houses, raped their women, and forced many of them to flee their

homes.

They pulled down the portrait of the father of the nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and replaced it by that of Begum Khaleda Zia. They put the murder cases of Bangabandhu and his family members and the four national leaders in cold storage.

AL workers, leaders and supporters including S.A.M.S. Kibria, Ahsanullah Master, Momtazuddin, Monjurul Imam, Ivy Rahman, and many more lost their lives.

Side by side, the government engaged in corruption and plundered national wealth, abusing state power on a scale never seen before, earning for the country the most humiliating title of most corrupt country in the world for

five consecutive years.

Sharing power with the communal and anti-liberation forces, they helped the rise of radical Islamic militancy that saw emergence of militants taking law in their own hands and executing people in broad daylight.

Begum Khaleda Zia, as prime minister of the country, did nothing to stop these dangerous games. She remained busy with power politics. She appointed her eldest son Tarique Rahman as the senior joint secretary of her party, by-passing many senior leaders, and allowed him to turn Hawa Bhaban into the epicentre of corruption and abuse of power.

BNP did everything in its power to rig the 2006 elections. They had their men planted in every tier of electoral process. They had their men in EC to have a voter list with nearly 1.5 crore fake voters, enough to stuff ballot boxes with fake ballot papers. They had their men in the law enforcement agencies to raid the houses of AL workers and make them run for life before the day of election.

As if that was not enough, they went for amendment of the constitution so that a man of their choice could become the chief of the caretaker government. That was a clue good enough for the opposition parties to be sure of the sinister design of the BNP-Jamaat jote to win the election by hook or by crook.

AL launched a massive movement against the government and placed a 23-point charter of demands to ensure a free, fair and credible election. But the alliance government would not accept any of these demands.

The president of the republic, leaving aside his old age and fragile health, was not even mentally strong enough to withstand the pressure and exercise his conscience in dealing with the situation when politics turned violent with the two sides taking their position on the streets.

As a loyalist of BNP, the president preferred to be dictated by BNP from behind the scene. He assumed the dual role of president and chief adviser on himself at the

insistence of BNP, by-passing the other options of the constitution.

That was probably the beginning of the end of the caretaker government envisaged in the constitution. With only 11 days left before a one-sided election, the army had to step in (in aid of civil administration) and persuade the president to quit the post of chief adviser, cancel election, and declare emergency.

The next day came the military-backed caretaker government of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed, with the blessings of the so-called civil society on the home front and donor countries and agencies on the external front.

Ignoring the constitutional obligation of 90 days' time-frame and limited agenda, Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed's caretaker government came out with a two-year time-frame and a big agenda that included, among others, preparation of a fresh voter list with photo and ID card, electoral and political reform, and a massive anti-corruption drive to ensure a free, fair, and credible election, free

of money and muscle.

People in general welcomed the move of the new caretaker government in good faith and great expectation. They specially welcomed the government for its massive anti-corruption drive.

With the emergency on and army behind, there was no problem for the CTG to put a large number of political bigwigs and a few business magnates inside jail in the name of operation clean-ship, if I may call it so. Preparation of a voter list with photo went smoothly, thanks to the hard and sincere work of the armed forces.

And now, after 21 months of emergency rule promising people a true democracy, a clean and violence-free politics, and a corruption-free society in exchange of their sacrifice of fundamental rights and surrender to a highly inflated market with prices of food and other essential items doubled or trebled, the government seems to have brought them back to where they started from.

The government now wants

Sheikh Hasina to sit with Begum Zia and sort things out. But what is really there for Sheikh Hasina to sort out with Begum Zia? To tell her: Yes, I will forget what you did to me and to my party in the last five years of your rule? Yes, my party will not go for hartal or any sort of movement, even if you go to power by manipulation of election and repeat what you did in the past?

To tell her: Yes, I shall not mind even if you cancel August 15, the day my father (the father of the nation), my mother, my brothers, and many other close relatives were killed in a military coup, as the national mourning day? Yes, I don't mind even if you celebrate this day with your party members in great pomp as your birthday?

If history is of any guide, the outcome of such a meeting at this stage is anybody's guess. The CTG would be well advised to go for the much-needed national election straightaway instead of undertaking any more misadventure.

Husain Imam is a retired merchant navy officer.

So, another Eid is approaching

Is the political leadership set to take the onerous task of helping the "many" of our society to really enjoy Eid with their kith and kin, which is their aspiration and our commitment? Let us do the soul searching, because the premise has been identified and the recipe is not quite unknown.

Z. A. KHAN

Wehave seen over the last many years a mad rush of people making beelines to rail or bus stations or to river ports for their journey home to celebrate Eid with their near and dear ones. The number of transports available was far short of the requirement. This forced the people to find entry to the transports even through windows, as the doors were too crowded to find a passage to their designated

places -- sometimes only to find an unauthorised occupant.

When asked why they undertook such a hazardous journey, some replied that they dared to undertake this odyssey to be beside their kith and kin and also to get relief from the horrendously difficult and suffocating urban life. Statistics available reveal that a majority of those who undertake such a sojourn are from the economically disadvantaged segment of our society. Most of them are

itinerants who live in shanties and slums without their families.

When away, these people save a part of their meagre income to send home to feed a few hungry kith who are unaware of the living conditions of their benefactors. These benefactors barely live a life, they rather let their life go the way their job steers them to. They range from factory workers to load-carriers in kitchens markets, rickshaw pullers to beggars. There are some fortunate ones who have jobs

of dignity of sorts and have a respectable address in the city.

Boys and girls living in dormitories of colleges and universities also head home despite the hassle of an utterly uncomfortable journey. Nowhere in the world can one witness such a spectacle. Has it been fated on them by the Almighty or is it a social problem of our making?

I should think it is very much a man-made problem, and I am not inclined to let these people feel that this is "fait accompli." It is the advantaged few who have encouraged the suffering many to blame fate for the deprivation by conspiring to deny them a living that would enable them to stay at home with their kith and kin.

I think it is about time we abandon

the age-old practice of emotional blackmail, lest it turns into an explosive situation, however temporary. Instances of intolerance are many because of the indifferent attitude of the employer to the basics of employment, which are regular payment of wages, medical support, and rest, recreation and welfare during non-working days. Work culture in the private sector is more about exacting and extracting than about providing means of emancipation and empowerment.

The workers are used as tools for enhancing production, ignoring vital factors like food, health, and rest. Entrepreneurial tyranny has caused dangerous revolutionary fervour that threatens production, causing immense problems for the

state to keep the economy vibrant. So the state, the entrepreneurs, and the employees should engage themselves to focus on a work culture that will not coerce either party, and bring about a level of tolerance which inhibits the possibilities of explosion and helps the wheels of production to run unimpeded.

Before this problem blows up, we must evolve a set of rules that will help create a healthy work environment where everybody can join hands to form a cohesive force to give fillip to our economy. Once the economy gets vibrant, it will open a gateway to more job opportunities, better financial commitments and a healthy work culture.

We have examples of China and a few countries of the Indo-Chinese peninsula that have taken

their economy to such heights that they could ensure a quantum jump in the quality of life of their people.

Asean countries are also meeting the same challenges with a considerable measure of success. We in Bangladesh have to put our act together more vigorously to translate our pre-liberation objectives of economic emancipation and empowerment, equitable distribution of wealth, and a quality of life that will remove the perceptible divide in our society. Initiatives needed in this direction are many and multifarious.

Decentralisation of administration, devolution of authority, participatory planning and management at all levels of national life, economic discipline, commitment of the leadership, and endurance of

the people are the factors that will help us ride through the tough and turbulent road to success.

All said and done, the fact is that Eid will come and go as it has in the past, albeit with added difficulties if we do not awaken ourselves to the harsh reality that between pleasures and pangs, the balance rudely tips in favour of pangs, even though the toiling people deserve a better deal.

Is the political leadership set to take the onerous task of helping the "many" of our society to really enjoy Eid with their kith and kin, which is their aspiration and our commitment? Let us do the soul searching, because the premise has been identified and the recipe is not quite unknown.

Z. A. Khan is a former Director General of BISS.

All in the family

LARRY JAGAN

THAILAND has a new prime minister, Somchai Wongsawat -- the brother-in-law of the ousted premier, Thaksin Shinawatra, who is currently in exile in England. But while the new PM's election ends days of uncertainty, it will not resolve the political crisis that has gripped the country for the past few weeks.

Parliament overwhelmingly elected Mr. Somchai, after the ruling People Power Party (PPP) appeared to be on the brink of splitting into several factions over his nomination. But the party's whips managed to scotch the revolt, and Thailand's new prime minister now starts what most analysts believe will only be a brief time in office.

It was always clear that the party would close ranks behind him, especially with Mr. Thaksin actively campaigning on his behalf on the phone from London. But unfortunately for Thailand, his election is unlikely to ease the political tension, as the protestors on the streets are at war with the whole political system, and will not be satisfied with anything less than a new constitution.

In what must be a good sign, though, Thailand's new leader immediately signalled his intention to try to resolve the country's current political crisis and promised to take a conciliatory approach towards the opposition in parliament and on the streets.

"It is time for Thailand to reconcile. We do not hate each other, so we should not let hatred prevent us from tackling the immediate problems the country is facing," he told reporters shortly after he was elected PM.

Mr. Somchai is an urbane, intelligent, polite and softly-spoken politician. "Mr. Somchai is a person who never speaks or does anything to divide society," said Professor Sombat Thamrongthanyawong, dean of

the National Institute of Development Administration.

This is Mr. Somchai's first term as an MP. Before entering politics, he had a long and distinguished career as a civil servant -- first as a judge, and later as the top government official in the justice and labour ministries. His experience and skills will make him a good negotiator and leader according to many analysts.

"He is certainly a policy professional, and that should stand him in good stead for the future," Professor Titinan Pongsudhirak, a political scientist at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University, told The Daily Star.

The new prime minister's main objective will be to bring unity to the country, according to senior members of the ruling party. "Plugging rifts in society is the most important step that needs to be taken at present," said the PPP former deputy leader, Yongyuth Tiyaipairat. "It's time we found ways to reconcile and restore peace."

But this will be no easy matter. Mr. Somchai's election has done nothing to placate the protestors in the streets of the capital. "We really don't care. This is just a group of bandits choosing a new leader," a PAD leader Somsak Kosaisuk told reporters after Somchai became their new premier.

The fact that he is related to Mr. Thaksin by marriage -- the real villain in Thai politics as far as the anti-government protestors are concerned -- will be a heavy cross to bear. "Even if he is not actually beholden to his brother-in-law, he will be tainted and constrained by this fact," said Prof. Titinan. "He will be vulnerable to personal abuse and accusations that will effectively limit his ability to act."

The immediate problem remains the thousands of anti-government protestors -- led by the umbrella groups, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) -- who have been occupying the prime minister's official com-

plex for the past three weeks, demanding an end to the PPP government, no matter who they elect as prime minister. They believe the former leader, Mr. Thaksin is continuing to pull the strings from abroad, and they are threatening to remain there until he and his influence are completely expunged from Thai politics.

"It's a question of rule of law -- the protestors are breaking the laws and as long as they remain in Government House, there is no rule of law in this country," the former deputy prime minister in the Thaksin government, Chaturon Chaisang told The Daily Star recently.

Most government parliamentarians also believe this situation is intolerable and must be stopped before the country can return to normal. But few are advocating direct action against the protestors by the security forces. "There's no smooth and legal solution," Mr. Chaturon conceded. "We have to avoid violence at all cost as this is exactly what the protestors want -- to give the military a pretext to intervene again."

Some senior PPP members are now openly suggesting starting negotiations with the "conflicting parties" to try to resolve the current political deadlock. Mr. Somchai has the temperament and approach needed, according to many academic, businessmen and politicians alike.

"Even though Mr. Somchai is Thaksin's brother-in-law, I don't think it should be a problem, he has his own way and is confident enough to rule the country," said Professor Thanes Charoenmaung, a political scientist at Chiang Mai University. "But he must try to hold a constructive dialogue with the PAD -- perhaps through intermediaries -- if the current political stand-off is to be solved."

But before he considers what to do about the protestors, the

new prime minister now has to select a new cabinet. For many in Thailand, the real test of the government in the next few weeks will be what they do to boost the economy. The value of shares on the Thai stock market has fallen by more than 30 percent in the last three months since the protests began. The value of the local currency is at its lowest in nearly twelve months.

Despite the dire warnings from businessmen -- and even the country's top general -- that the crisis is severely damaging Thailand's international reputation, the political crisis is unlikely to be resolved soon.

"With the appointment of a new prime minister, the PPP is simply trying to buy time," said Professor Titinan Pongsudhirak. "The game-plan is to last two or three months, pass the national budget, disperse the funds, and lay the groundwork within the constituencies for the next election."

Whatever happens in the coming days and weeks, the writings on the wall for the ruling PPP. The election commission has unanimously recommended that the party be disbanded and at least ten top party officials be banned from politics for at least five years for electoral irregularities and vote-buying. The constitutional court is expected to decide on the case in the next few months, and is almost certain to accept the election commission's conclusions.

The future of Thailand's democratic system remains at the root of the current crisis. The motley group of businessmen, activists, and academics involved in the PAD paint themselves as champions of a cleaner government and defenders of the monarchy. They advocate a return to an appointed government, claiming popular democracy is swayed by money -- especially Thaksin's billions.

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Pakistan on the brink

AHMED RASHID

For the past seven years the Bush administration studiously ignored the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda leadership gathering in the tribal areas of Pakistan, and now scrambles to make up for lost time.

US elections are looming, and facing the humiliating prospect of Osama bin Laden outlasting a two-term presidency and even expanding his reach, Bush has pushed the Pentagon into a do or die hunt for bin Laden. Whether the search for an "October surprise" for the election succeeds or not, the radical threat is now beyond easy military solution.

It's a sign of desperation that on September 16 the chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff was in Islamabad meeting the Pakistan army chief, his boss Secretary of Defense Bob Gates was in Kabul, while Pakistan's newly elected President Asif Ali Zardari was in London begging Prime Minister Gordon Brown to get the Americans off his back and deliver aid to a beleaguered country rather than angry ripostes.

Pakistan is at the center of a gathering fire storm engulfing south and central Asia in the most volatile confrontation since 9/11. Pakistan, Afghanistan, the US and Nato all bear heavy responsibility for the crisis.

Bush had neither the inclination nor urge to do right by Afghanistan, despite pleas by President Hamid Karzai to eliminate cross-border terrorist strikes from Pakistan and effectively rebuild the country.

Senior US officers serving in Afghanistan say they begged the White House and the State Department for action in 2006, but Bush was cozy with Pakistan's former President Pervez Musharraf and Iraq occupied US attention. Meanwhile, veteran John McCain flails in effectively playing the national security card against Barack Obama because Republican policies failed to secure the homeland against future al-Qaeda attacks.

The ISI saw Bush's lack of attention as a free pass to re-engage the Taliban as a Pakistani proxy force. The army hedged its bets against possible US and Nato withdrawal from Afghanistan or danger of India becoming too influential in Kabul, by moving pro-Pakistan Afghan leaders into Kabul and carving out a dominant position in Afghan politics.

Until this year, Pakistan appeared to be winning the game. Then the Afghan Taliban launched an unprecedented offensive against US, Nato, and Afghan security forces, attempting to paralyse the country by cutting all major roads to urban centres, thereby depriving the people of supplies and Western forces of fuel and ammunition -- 80 percent of which is trucked through Pakistan -- and killing aid workers so what little development work is taking place comes to a grinding halt.

Catching the Pakistani military off guard was dramatic growth of the Pakistani Taliban. Pakistani Pashtun tribesmen in the border region were quickly radicalised by their al-Qaeda guests. Last year, Pakistani Taliban militias developed their own political agenda -- to Talibanise northern Pakistan and create a new "sharia state" that would lead to the balkanisation of Pakistan.

The Pakistani Taliban now control all seven tribal agencies that make up the autonomous region bordering Afghanistan called the Federal Administered Tribal Areas. They have spread across the NWFP through brutal terror tactics and threaten large towns. Poised on the borders of Punjab, the largest province, they're joined by Punjabi and Kashmiri extremist groups.

US forces in Afghanistan launch almost daily attacks against suspected al-Qaeda hideouts in FATA and also target Afghan Taliban leaders such as Jalaluddin Haqqani. Pakistan's military first denied the strikes, then virulently protested them. However on September 3, US navy seals put boots on the

ground in FATA to demonstrate US seriousness and perhaps to also blackmail Pakistan to own up to US missile strikes and gain greater cooperation from the army. As a result, the army now says it allows US missile strikes despite public anger over Pakistan losing its sovereignty.

The army's policies over the past fateful seven years led to Pakistan losing much of its territorial sovereignty. Heavily armed militant groups run wild, crime is rampant, paramilitary and police morale has plummeted with a stream of desertions. The country is in the throes of an economic meltdown. Foreign exchange reserves have halved in the past three months to less than \$8 billion, inflation runs at 25 percent, power shortages cripple industry and agriculture, and massive unemployment fuels a resentful populace.

President Zardari's first tasks are to deal with the faltering economy and get a grip on the war against terrorism while satisfying international concerns. So far he has not much to show. Since the new PPP-led coalition government took office in February, it's been locked in interminable battles with Sharif. If Zardari continues on those lines, Pakistan is sunk. Promising economic aid and demanding ISI reforms, a lame-duck Bush administration cannot rescue Zardari.

Zardari needs to develop a partnership with the army to fight the terrorists, but so far the army lacks strategy or coherence -- one day bombing villages in FATA, the next day announcing ceasefires and offering compensation to militants. It has failed to protect the people of FATA -- some 800,000 of a population of just 3.5 million have fled the region since 2006 -- terrified of both the army and the Taliban.

The army has still not made the necessary strategic U-turn, giving up on the Afghan Taliban leadership who live in Balochistan. The ISI still attempts to separate the favored Afghan

Taliban from the disfavored Pakistani Taliban and al-Qaeda. But the truth is that all operate under a common strategy and guidelines set by al-Qaeda. The aim for al-Qaeda is to use the coming months to take serious territory in the NWFP where it can re-establish safe bases and training camps it once had in Afghanistan.

The American answer is to send more troops to Afghanistan -- 4,500 are due to arrive soon and another 10,000 by next year -- and pressure Pakistan. However the solution no longer lies in a single country. The Taliban are now a regional problem and the next US administration must generate a regional strategy that encompasses Iran, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, and the five Central Asian republics.

Western forces cannot win in Afghanistan without dealing with Pakistan, but the military will only change its colours when it feels more secure vis a vis India which has warm relations with President Karzai and Tajiks in northern Afghanistan. Likewise Iran, now arming groups in Afghanistan, needs to be addressed directly by the Americans.

Going back to the UN Security Council to get a new mandate for a major regional diplomatic initiative, coupled with a massive regional aid program and widespread public information campaign that portrays the Western coalition as a regional problem-solver rather than a warmonger, are the needs of the hour.

However the issue is whether the next US president, Europe and NATO will have the courage and the will to take the bull by the horns and attempt something new rather than continue with a policy that has clearly failed.

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