

Emergency goes

The final impetus to election provided

WE heartily welcome the lifting of the state of emergency from today, which actually fulfills the last major precondition for a smooth, participatory return to a democratic order. We expect the political parties to think likewise, as they have been consistent and relentless in demanding the withdrawal of the state of emergency. It has set the stage for the political parties' spontaneous participation in the December 29 parliamentary elections, without any demur and hesitancy.

The lifting of the state of emergency should finally end all speculations regarding the caretaker government's position vis-à-vis the elections and it has come just after the nation celebrated the Victory Day, so we can really feel an aura of auspiciousness in the coincidence.

The issue of spontaneity seems to be relevant to us, because none other than Begum Khaleda Zia, the BNP chief, is talking of the elections being engineered to bring a certain party to power. Such allegations or discordant note can hardly add to the congeniality of the electoral atmospherics. We would like to believe that conspiracy theories, often degenerating into scare-mongering, will be proved wrong, and the "shockers" will pass off as election gimmicks.

What the political parties cannot overlook at this point in time is that it is now their turn to show a high degree of responsibility and maturity by way of responding to the people's yearning for transfer of power to a democratically elected representative government. Now that the parties are firmly settled in the election groove, they should play their part in steering the nation to its cherished goal for attaining a truly democratic order.

The comment we would like to make on the emergency period centres around denial of bail which hampered dispensation of justice. Needless to say, right to bail is a fundamental underpinning of the justice system. Initially, some restrictions were placed on the press, particularly the electronic media. But over the months these were relaxed.

All said and done, the journey along the road to democracy needs to be embarked upon with unflinching commitment to the wellbeing of the state and its people.

Thailand's continuing crisis

Political process behind frequent change of guard undemocratic

IN a new twist to its politics, Thailand finds itself under a new government, the third in as many months. There is surely nothing wrong with governments collapsing for lack of parliamentary strength or electoral support and being replaced by new ones. The problem, though, with Thailand in these past two years has been a growing propensity on the part of powerful quarters to weed out governments in a process that laid itself open to criticism as being arbitrary. In September 2006, the military ousted Thaksin Shinawatra's elected government and so started the process that has now led to the present crisis. Thaksin enjoyed the support of a majority of Thais, particularly in the rural regions and among the poor. Those who welcomed his overthrow were the urban elite and the royalists. Despite his removal, however, Thaksin saw two governments, both formed by his loyalists, come to office.

That did not help the country. The judiciary ruled the first of Thaksin's successors out of office on grounds that were questionable. The second was similarly thrown out, again by the judiciary. Amazingly, the court had little time or patience to remember that the governments it was ejecting from power had been elected by the people. All of this was bound to lead to some bizarre happenings, the latest being the appointment of opposition leader Abhisit Vejjajiva as the new prime minister. The new leader comes to office after weeks of drama that saw Bangkok's airports being commandeered by his supporters and the chief of the army giving every indication that he wanted Thaksin's followers out. King Bhumibol Adulyadej kept conspicuous silence, a hint of where his feelings lay. Abhisit supporters have been going about spreading innuendoes about the allegedly anti-royalist sentiments of Thaksin supporters. It all fell into a pattern.

The questionable and warped political process that has undermined Thailand's democracy is typical of the country. The fall of one government after another does not bode well for the country's future, particularly the economy which has carved a niche for itself. Those who have campaigned against Thailand's elected governments in these past two years have done grave disservice to democracy. Abhisit Vejjajiva's rise to power, in such dubious circumstances, is a sign that the crisis is not about to end soon, indeed can only get deeper.

Manifestos, much hubris and no contrition

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THERE was little contrition. There was much hubris. And there was a load of anger in Begum Zia as she made public her party's electoral manifesto the other day. Hubris is understandable. Lack of contrition is not.

In the five years prior to October 2006, there was much that went wrong. Indeed, everything went wrong. Bridges were built, in segmented, incomplete form. Men who owned nothing in 2001 ended up being entrepreneurs by 2006. Ruling party men carried themselves in the manner of highway robbers. Ministers built homes at state expense. Other ministers had government officials beautify their homes with money that belonged to citizens. Foreign policy went missing. So did the national reputation for integrity, as all those corruption indicators told us.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party would have done itself a world of good had it humbled itself, had it acknowledged the error of its past ways. The manifesto would have been taken as a serious document if only the party had informed the nation that it had learned from its mistakes, that it was ready to turn a new page. None of this of course has happened. Begum Zia and her friends, without batting an eyelid, have now told us all that what happened in January 2007 was a conspiracy. That is quite an argument. Or call it sophistry.

Conveniently forgotten is the conspiracy that went into installing Iajuddin Ahmed as head of the caretaker government. Mischief was afoot and ghosts prowled in the dark, until a body of new men stepped in, to throw the interlopers out. And that was the end of conspiracy.

But the BNP, despite seeing all its ministers, ministers of state and lawmakers making a beeline to prison or absconding, does not see it that way. That is bizarre. And mystifying is the slogan it has adopted for itself: save the country, save the people.

From whom? From what? The caretakers? From the nation itself? Part of the saving was done on January 11 last year,

GROUND REALITIES

The past is an unhealthy one. How will the BNP convince the country it will be more civil, more businesslike in the days to be? Its manifesto speaks of modernising the Gulshan shooting complex! It does not explain why the party, in its days in government, so insistently and conspicuously shot down so much that was good in the country.



The people demand more.

from those who had been squeezing the country like so much lemon. The remaining bit will come, if it comes at all, when the electorate votes in a government of honest, well-meaning men and women who have had nothing to do with the five years when the BNP and Jamaat were around.

The BNP manifesto does not cheer us -- because it does not speak for the country. It turns a blind eye to the corruption of the government that was there until two years ago. The corruption, say these unembarrassed men and women in the party, was

not there. What was there was intrigue, to paint the country in bad light at the national and global levels. So much for political reinvention. You would have thought a party that ran the worst government in Bangladesh's history would take time off, sit back, go into reflection and come up with ideas of a purification of its soul. That has not happened.

Indeed, something more ominous is in the air. The Begum now speaks of values, those represented by "Bangladeshi nationalists" and Islamists. She speaks of commu-

nal harmony, but says nothing about the secular underpinnings of this land. Not a word is there in the manifesto about religious extremism in the BNP era. Not a whisper is heard about the war criminals, the same who killed Bengalis in 1971 and joined the BNP in government in 2001. The manifesto speaks of the War of Liberation, but goes silent on the need to uphold the spirit of that war. It speaks of strengthening the public bodies -- ACC, EC, PSC -- the party undermined over the years.

But let us not quibble. There are some good points made in the manifesto. The speaker and deputy speaker, should the BNP and its allies return to office, will cease being members of political parties; the deputy speaker will be from the opposition; and consensus between the treasury and opposition benches will underline the functions of Parliament.

These are noble thoughts. Why were they not there before October 2006? In the years of Sheikh Hasina's government, Prime Minister's Question Hour was a welcome act. It went dead when Begum Zia, as leader of the opposition, demonstrated a consistency in not being present on the day of the questions.

In the last parliament, ruling coalition lawmakers stood up to discuss the budget and then quickly descended to making vituperative attacks on the leader of the opposition. The speaker let his party men go on talking nonsense. He shut off the microphones when the opposition tried to speak on grave national issues.

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Ladies and gentlemen, surely this country deserves better?

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star. E-mail: bahsanareq@yahoo.co.uk

Fettered by fear

BYLINE

For secular politicians, the Muslim vote comes at an easy exchange rate. Other communities demand rice and roads. The Muslim needs nothing more than the old ploy used to help children go to sleep: stories of ghosts and monsters at the door.

M.J. AKBAR

INDIAN Muslims will get development the day they vote for development. For sixty years they have voted out of fear, so that is what they have got from those they elected: the politics of fear. Fear is the menu, recipe and diet: and the Muslim voter laps it up with the appetite of the traumatised.

Fact and fiction are employed seamlessly in the advertising of fear. A history of riot, and the threat from organisations like the Bajrang Dal are sewn into wild conspiracy theories by "leaders" of the community to shape minds on the eve of an election.

I could not believe some of what I heard after the terrorist attacks in Mumbai. One was utterly aghast to hear, during a public gathering of some very worthy persons, the suggestion that we could not be sure that the terrorists had come from Pakistan. It was an appalling exercise in denial by mindsets that had either been unhinged or had turned utterly manipulative.

For secular politicians, the Muslim vote comes at an easy exchange rate. Other communities demand rice and roads. The Muslim needs nothing more than the old ploy used to help children go to sleep: stories of ghosts and monsters at the door.

When the community wakes up after sleepwalking to the polling booth, and demands legitimate needs like jobs for the young and health clinics for women, the politicians offer a large shoulder on which they can weep. No other segment of the Indian electorate can be appeased by a sob story.

Politicians will always maximise the spread of assets at their disposal in the search for an extra vote; why should they waste economic benefits on a voter who will sway to the whine of emotions rather than take a cold count of schools and sanitation? There is now a disconnect between Muslims and the benefits of democracy, a break engineered by community opinion-makers who get rewarded for such services with little dollops that wind up into their personal assets.

Fear used to be a factor with some other communities as well, particularly Dalits and tribals. They have moved on, either by asserting themselves through their own political formations or by

maximising the price of their support. The sharpest player of this intelligent game is Mayawati. The results are evident. There is a good study waiting to be done comparing the employment levels, educational services and municipal services in Dalit residential areas and Muslim areas between 1947 and 2007.

Even without empirical data I can assert that there is a sharp improvement in the former and stagnation if not decline in the latter. The Dalit has punished neglect. The tribal has learnt to vote on the sensible planks of development and security; he knows that he cannot eat rice, at whatever price it is offered, unless he is alive. The Muslim has crawled repeatedly back into the sterile womb of fear. That womb will deliver nothing. The midwives of this vote fatten on fees collected by periodic declarations of false pregnancy.

Only one state is an exception: Kerala. Untroubled by the guilt of Partition, the Malayali Muslim can rally around the banner of an All-India Muslim League, which is a bit of a misnomer. It is not an all-Indian organisation; it is a local Muslim party. The Kerala Muslim, with sufficient self-assurance to meet political and economic challenges, has always behaved like an equal, which is why he is treated like one. He has prised out the benefits of progress through the pressure points of a democratic polity.

There could have been a similar story in Bengal, because the Marxists are committed to both secularism and progress for the underprivileged. They were the first to empower Bengali Muslims through land reforms. That won them the loyalty of the rural vote. But two fallow decades are forcing a shift in Muslim sentiment; it is not willing to be taken for granted any longer.

One senses the first stir of change in Bihar, where Nitish Kumar has begun to include Muslims within his development-based governance. The pace may not overly perturb a snail, but at least a process has started. But if the voter does not honour this start with support, then it will be back to fulmination and hot air.

Fear locks and freezes the mind. A closed mind can never liberate a community from poverty.

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

American pressure

PLAIN WORDS

All these pressures are now building up on Islamabad knowing not where to turn. Relations with India have remained tense, with occasional hope that they might someday become friends. But the latest terror attacks on Mumbai have again put the clock back.

M.B. NAQVI

THREAT from the anger in India, following the Mumbai terror attacks, has added to other pressures that were, and are, far more persistent. Indian pressure is a familiar reality. The two states have run a cold war, interspersed with hot wars, for long.

From day one, the two countries had the Kashmir dispute and have done everything possible to discredit each other. An element of terror came into Indo-Pakistan relations in the 1990s, which has persisted. All things considered, the two countries are unlikely to go to war, though the threat of it has been persistent for sometime.

The second major pressure is from Islamic zealotry, in the promotion of which the entire West is implicated, and Pakistan's enthusiastic participation in creating the first Mujahideen and their later version, Taliban, for Afghanistan is notable.

Taliban and other militants are now at war with Pakistan, where the latter has not been winning. The threat of Taliban sweeping the Frontier Province and making inroads in Punjab is real. It is an important war and the future of 170 million people depends on it.

The Pakistan state can break up; the area can remain embroiled in multiple civil wars and endemic conflict. That can have repercussions both in India and elsewhere in South Asia.

The third pressure is from Nato and US. They demand that Pakistan should fight the Taliban in FATA and other areas of NWFP to protect the supply line of Western troops in Afghanistan. Pakistan disagrees with what the West is doing, but is forced to wage a war in FATA and fight Islamic zealotry whenever it threatens the Western troops' supply line.

But neither side, Pakistan or Nato, is happy with the situation. The threat to Western troops comes from two sources: Taliban and other Islamic militants. Taliban, using Pakistan territory, goes into Afghanistan to battle the Nato and US troops. Hence the West demand Pakistan keep the Taliban constantly engaged, so that they do not cross over into Afghanistan.

Pakistan perceives this prescription as one that will ultimately destroy all of Pakistan, through areas of the country becoming Talibanised. And yet Pakistan does what the West demands. That fails to satisfy the West, which continues to demand more. The Islamic parties in the country are openly sympathetic to the Taliban, forgetting that this can mean much grief. This is the greatest threat.

When the West began scheming against the Soviet influence in Kabul, Pakistan was required to play a hard game. Pakistan's closer involvement in the East-West cold war did not suit a small and weak country. But the Americans had promised much to Pakistan if it played the game. The un-awarded promise was for Pakistan to acquire a dominating influence in Kabul. This was an imperial role that scarcely suited a country that subsisted on military and economic aid from Western countries. It should have kept a low profile.

In the 1970s, Peshawar had become a cockpit of Western intelligence. Pakistan was victorious, because the Soviets threw in the towel and left shortly after the peace they made at Geneva. Pakistan then played a hard role. It ensured the final elimination of the pro-Soviet government and installed a Mujahideen government in Peshawar and was carried in an American C-130 to Kabul. The then Pakistan prime minister escorted them.

Pakistan's lordship over Afghanistan lasted from 1992 to 2001. The first government faced many civil wars and other conflicts, though surviving in the northern region that houses ethnic minorities of Afghanistan. But the largest ethnic group the Pushtoons, were dissatisfied, because they were totally out of power.

Pakistan introduced in 1994 the Taliban, who conquered some 80% of Afghan territory and established themselves in Kabul by 1996. This government, too, was pro-West and pro-Pakistan. But, thanks to oil politics, the rigidity of Taliban, and its international strategic interests, the US decided to attack Afghanistan and occupy it.

The war continues where Pakistan is made to play the ancillary role of helping the West win over Afghanistan again -- which seems unlikely.

All these pressures are now building up on Islamabad knowing not where to turn. It is not winning against the Taliban and other Islamic militants. Relations with India have remained tense, with occasional hope that they might someday become friends. But the latest terror attacks on Mumbai have again put the clock back. Pakistanis have reasons to fear that a war might break out.

But it is unlikely, thanks to the West's exigencies of the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan's role in it. In substance, this is a question of Pakistan's own survival. No one can welcome the disintegration and attendant troubles in Pakistan. It is far too important in itself and in its location that no one can agree on what will or should follow it.

M.B. Naqvi is a leading Pakistani columnist.