

Oath to responsibility not power

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

And these may just be possible if the new prime minister and her cabinet colleagues keep in mind that the oath they have taken on January 6 is an oath to responsibility not an oath to power.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

None perhaps could have put it better than the gentleman, who, when asked about his expectations from the newly sworn in MPs, said that he would hope that the new members of the parliament would take this oath as an affirmation of their intention to work for bettering the lot of the people rather than an opportunity to wield the power of their position to better their own lot.

One hopes that the government of Sheikh Hasina would take this feeling to heart, it being not the hope of one individual only but also representative of the expectation of the vast majority of the people of Bangladesh.

But one cannot proceed without first expressing one's sense of satisfaction in the fact that the CTG and the Election Commission have succeeded in giving the nation an election, which, in spite of some minor procedural flaws, went without a hitch.

Any attempt to paint the outcome or the process in any other way would only ring hollow, for it was not only the more than two hundred thousand election observers who oversaw the process on the December 29th, I feel that everyone of the more than 85 percent of the voters that turned out to vote acted as observer.

It is thus nice to see the BNP acknowledging the reality and accepting the verdict of the people by not declaring to boycott the parliament. It has also certainly proved

those wrong who, in the last one year, tried to read all sorts of ulterior motives into all the election-related work that the armed forces were asked to carry out, including their deployment as part of the law and order machinery prior to the election.

One would have to admit that the confidence engendered by the presence of the law enforcing agencies prior to the election was one of the reasons for the huge turnout.

For Hasina and her party and the grand coalition, there is the need to exercise equanimity and self-restraint and at the same time demonstrate a non-partisan, democratic and inclusive attitude in the parliament to ensure that the Jatiyo Sangshad is not turned into a grinding machine of the brute majority that would ride rough-shod over the sentiments of the opposition in the parliament.

It would be wrong to overlook the fact that 27 BNP parliamentarians represent 32 percent of the voters in Bangladesh. It is good to see that the new prime minister is aware of this reality, and she has gone on record saying that her government will not consider the number of opposition seats in the parliament to lend it the importance and weightage the opposition deserves, but the substantive manner in which they perform as the opposition.

Sheikh Hasina has her task cut out, which she has also publicly acknowledged. A good start, one feels, has been made, by keeping the cabinet small, too small perhaps, some aver. But that is better than the more than 60 ministers that the last BNP and the alliance



In the service of the people.

government started with, as if ministerial posts are largesse to be doled out to keep the errant party men beholden to the boss.

But while one has to accept that the cabinet gives the picture of a clean group, one cannot but, at the same time, express some degree of apprehension at the fact that except for a few all new hands at running state affairs. Whatever may have been at the back of the mind of the AL chief to keep the heavyweights and the old party stalwarts out of the cabinet (most of the left outs belong to the "reform" camp) Hasina has no doubt taken a great risk in choosing the cabinet she has.

However, no one should question her ministers' ability before they have a chance to prove themselves. All the nation wants is that Hasina, with her team, deliver to the people the pledges made before the election.

However, unlike so many, my expectations are not mountain high. I would only hope that the new government would take lessons from the mistakes of the past and avoid the crony capitalism of the BNP-

4party alliance regime. I hope that Sheikh Hasina would be able to break the unholy alliance between business syndicates and some politicians that has been singularly responsible for the price spiral over the last two years, and which was beyond the capability of the highly educated CTG advisors to tackle.

I would hope that the new government would reduce dependence on foreign aid (in spite of what the outgoing commerce advisor has suggested) and resist their imposed policy; that it would reduce government spending; that it would formulate a proactive foreign policy and take the challenges head on; and that it would bring to trial the alleged war criminals.

And these may just be possible if the new prime minister and her cabinet colleagues keep in mind that the oath they have taken on January 6 is an oath to responsibility not an oath to power.

The author is Editor, Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

A cabinet of new faces

We applaud PM's boldness, but performance will be the judge

THE PM is to be congratulated on the boldness of her thinking when it comes to those named to her cabinet. She has thought outside the box to bring together a team that is notable for the absence of most of the old guard and anyone whose name is linked to corruption.

In other respects, as well, this is a cabinet to be optimistic about. It is not over-sized, it is not packed with the PM's family members or those known to patronise cadres, and, by and large, is filled with fresh faces with good track record and clean reputations. Of course, we note with disappointment that some able names with good reputations have been left off the list, apparently due to their lack of perceived loyalty to the PM.

But there appears to have been a serious attempt to bring in people more from the grassroots district level rather than only the central party leadership, to seat a broad-based and balanced cabinet, to bring in coalition partners, and to blood a new generation of untainted leaders -- all good signs.

Only two ministers have held full ministerial roles before, A.M.A. Muhith and Matia Chowdhury, and both are excellent choices, who bring a proven record of accomplishment to their jobs.

The inclusion of two untried faces at home and foreign affairs has caught attention. At home, Shahara Khatun, is well known for her probity and ability, and we hold her in high regard. This is perhaps the most challenging and difficult ministry to handle and will require astuteness and a firm hand. She will need to exert her authority from day one.

Similarly, in the case of Dr. Dipu Moni, the new foreign minister, we know her to be a talented woman with an excellent reputation, and there is no question in our mind that she merits a place in the cabinet and we envision a very bright future for her.

There is a question, however, whether the high pressure position of foreign minister, where she will be expected to negotiate with the likes of Hillary Clinton and Pranab Mukherjee, is the ministry to debut one untested on the international stage and in governance. It is a tough job even for the most talented, and usually goes to a seasoned hand.

Our final point is over the role of the four advisers to the PM. The four are of the utmost reputation, and any government would surely be happy to have them in its corner. But our concern is the scope for confusion, even conflict, in their relation to the cabinet, and we call on the PM to clarify the modalities of the arrangement.

In the final analysis, only time will tell. It is too soon to render any definitive judgment. We will have a good sense of what direction things are going within the next 100 days. Until then, we congratulate the PM for the freshness of her thinking and hope that the new faces she has taken a chance on will rise to the challenge and fulfill the nation's high expectations of them.

Martyrdom of Imam Hussein (RA)

A triumph of piety and faith

THE 10th day of Muharram is observed throughout the Muslim world with a profound sense of grief as well as a solemn realisation of how Imam Hussein (RA), the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh), set a unique example of piety and unflinching faith in Allah, the Merciful, by not bowing down to a repressive Yezid.

His Martyrdom at Karbala, along with other members of his family, left a message for not only Muslims but also mankind as a whole. He placed peace above everything else as a true believer and had the thought of welfare of others uppermost in his mind. He wanted a peaceful resolution but Yezid tried to coerce him to submission. Imam Hussein (RA), however, was ready to sacrifice his life for the ideals that he stood for and preferred a honourable death to the ignominy of surrender.

The Karbala tragedy has gone down in history as an episode where the innocent and the pious were up against a villainous ruler. They lost their lives under most tragic circumstances but a deeper look into the matter would instantly reveal that theirs was a glorious sacrifice which amounted to a disgraceful moral defeat for the evil forces. Nothing explains in a more emphatic manner the truth emanating from the Karbala tragedy, that the spirit of a believer cannot be destroyed.

Today when the Muslim world is passing through a crisis, the teachings of Karbala can indeed help it find the right path. Jihad actually means waging war against all that is evil. Muslims are supposed to fight for world peace and refrain from causing sufferings to others.

Karbala was the ultimate manifestation of how the true believers are supposed to respond to adverse situations. It was a glorious triumph of faith. And what Muslims must not forget today is that the best and only way to pay homage to Imam Hussein (RA) is to follow his ideals.

Crossroads moment on climate change

The start of 2009 is a crossroads moment on climate change: does the world look at the financial events unfolding, the complexity of the issue, the challenge of financing, and say it's too hard to act and act quickly?

ED MILIBAND

THE start of 2009 is a crossroads moment on climate change: does the world look at the financial events unfolding, the complexity of the issue, the challenge of financing, and say it's too hard to act and act quickly? Or do we resolve from here to affirm our aim of a broad and inclusive agreement and keep on the road to a global deal in Copenhagen in December 2009?

To stay on the path to a deal, 2009 must be a year of negotiation not discussion, and we all need to raise our game. Morally, we know the scale of the threat of a changing climate. Economically, we know the costs of not acting outweigh the costs of acting, and the

costs grow the longer we wait.

And so to up the pace, we need to do three things.

Each country must show clear intent, guided by the science. Many developing countries are setting out national plans to show how they want to tackle climate change. We in the UK have adopted a target to cut emissions by 80% by 2050, we will adopt challenging targets for 2020 and we have enshrined national carbon budgets in law. All of this is driven by our understanding of what the science tells us about the impact of dangerous climate change.

We need to be ambitious about what we can achieve. Of course, circumstances are hard, we are now in times of economic

difficulty and the pressure of this can be felt across the globe. But we now have a framework to guide our effort: the aim of at least 50% cut in emissions by 2050 compared to 1990. Developed countries will have to do more -- which is why the UK has set an 80% cut in law, and why we should all welcome the fact that president-elect Obama has done the same. But if we have targets for 2050, we also need interim targets, and that is something we will have to resolve together in the coming year.

We need to remember that we are all in this together. Climate change is an issue, which transcends all others in the way it shows we are interdependent: in how it affects us and whether we can tackle it.

And if we are all in this together, we know the basis of an agreement is likely to be: major reductions from developed countries, substantial deviation from business as usual by developing countries, and significantly increased and reliable flows of finance for adaptation and mitigation for developing countries. None of this will be easy.

At the UN climate conference in Poznan,

a number of developing and developed countries came together around principles we should apply to deforestation in an agreed statement. And in support of the huge efforts made at the conference to get the adaptation fund up and running, we also committed more money on urgent adaptation needs through the UN funds and contributed another £100m to forestry, reflecting the importance of capacity-building and the obligations we acknowledge to the rainforest nations.

We know this is only a contribution to what is required, but it is a sign of intent. It reflects the spirit of being in it together.

In Poznan, we reaffirmed our determination to up the pace on the road to Copenhagen. And we should recognise that since it must be done, it can be done and, therefore, it can be done by us together. We have come a long way forward in the recognition of the problem of climate change and the need to tackle it. We must in the year ahead make our global commitment to act a reality.

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If Obama is serious

If Obama is serious about peacemaking he'll have to adjust that balance in two ways. First, whatever the transgressions of the Palestinians (and there are many, including terror, violence and incitement), he'll also have to deal with Israel's behaviour on the ground.

AARON DAVID MILLER

JEWs worry for a living; their tragic history compels them to do so. In the next few years, there will be plenty to worry about, particularly when it comes to Israel. The current operation in Gaza won't do much to ease these worries or to address Israel's longer-term security needs.

The potential for a nuclear Iran, combined with the growing accuracy and lethality of Hamas and Hizbullah rockets, will create tremendous concern. Anxiety may also be provoked by something else: an Obama administration determined to repair America's image and credibility, and to reach a deal in the Middle East.

Don't get me wrong. Barack Obamaas every other US president before him will protect the special relationship with Israel. But the days of America's exclusive ties to Israel may be coming to an end.

Despite efforts to sound reassuring during the campaign, the new administration will have to be tough, much tougher than either Bill Clinton or George W. Bush were, if it's serious about Arab-Israeli peacemaking.

The departure point for a viable peace deal either with Syria or the Palestinians must not be based purely on what the political traffic in Israel will bear, but on the requirements of all sides.

The new president seems tougher and more focused than his predecessors; he's unlikely to become enthralled by either of Israel's two leading candidates for prime minister: centrist Foreign Minister Tzipi

Livni, or Likudnik Benjamin Netanyahu.

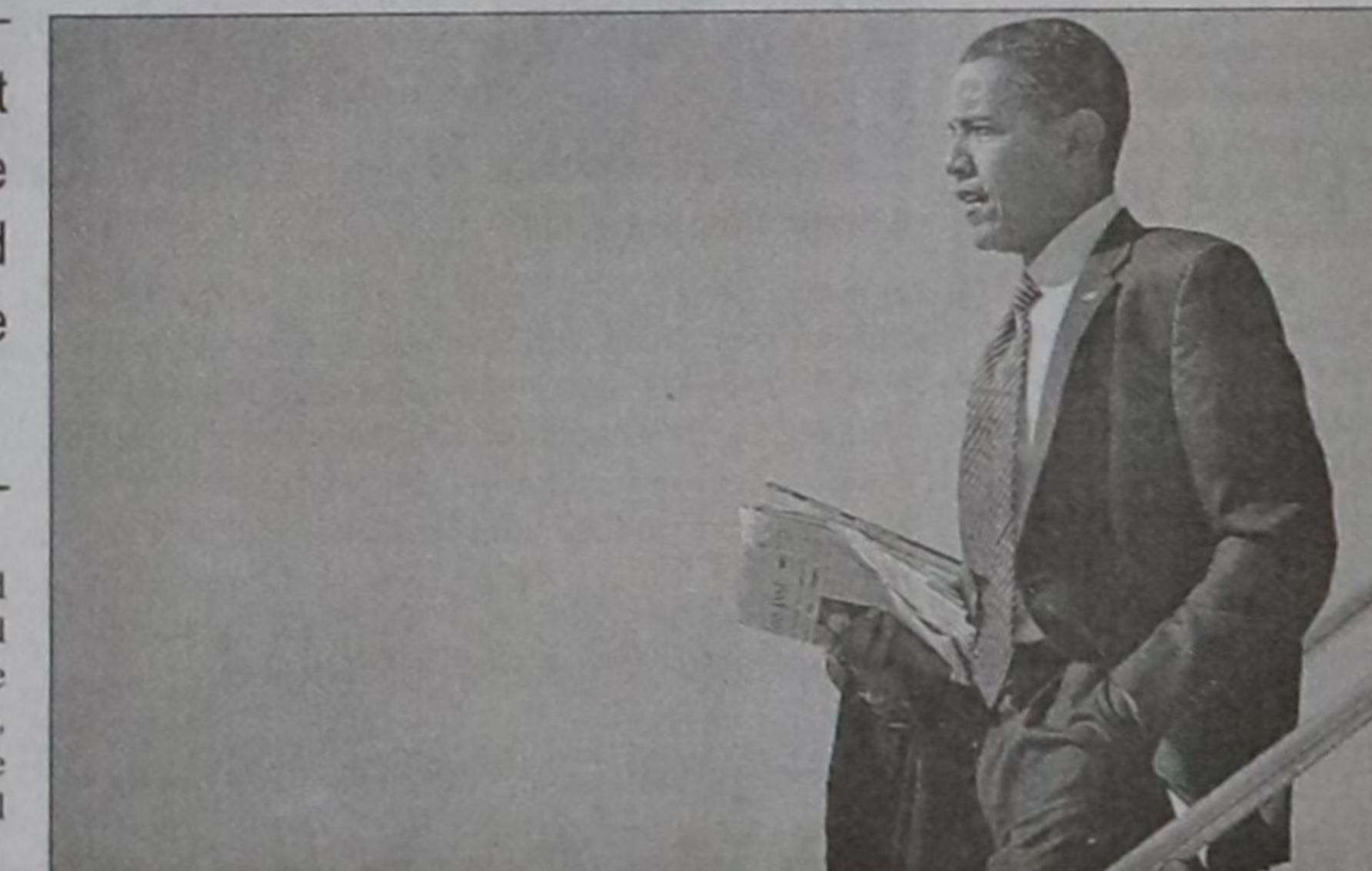
Indeed, if it's the latter, he may well find himself (like Clinton) privately frustrated with Netanyahu's tough policies. Unlike Clinton, if Israeli behaviour crosses the line, he should allow those frustrations to surface publicly in the service of American national interests.

The issue at hand is to find the right balance in America's ties with Israel. Driven by shared values and based on America's 60-year commitment to Israel's security and well-being, the special relationship is rock solid. But for the past 16 years, the United States has allowed that special bond to become exclusive in ways that undermine America's, and Israel's, national interests.

If Obama is serious about peacemaking he'll have to adjust that balance in two ways. First, whatever the transgressions of the Palestinians (and there are many, including terror, violence and incitement), he'll also have to deal with Israel's behaviour on the ground.

The Gaza crisis is a case in point. Israel has every reason to defend itself against Hamas. But does it make sense for America to support its policy of punishing Hamas by making life unbearable for 1.5 million Gazans by denying aid and economic development? The answer is no.

Then there's the settlements issue. In 25 years of working on this issue for six secretaries of state, I can't recall one meeting where we had a serious discussion with an Israeli prime minister about the damage that settlement activity including land con-



How good a juggler is he?

fiscation, bypass roads and housing demolitions does to the peacemaking process.

There is a need to impose some accountability. And this can only come from the president. But Obama should make it clear that America will not lend its auspices to a peacemaking process in which the actions of either side willfully undermine the chances of an agreement America is trying to broker. No process at all would be better than a dishonest one that hurts America's credibility.

Second, Obama will have to maintain his independence and tactical flexibility to play the mediator's role. This means not road testing everything with Israel first before previewing it to the other side, a practice we followed scrupulously during the Clinton and Bush years. America must also not agree to every idea proposed by an Israeli prime minister.

Our willingness to go along with Ehud Barak's make-or-break strategy at the Camp David summit proved very costly where more disciplined critical thinking on our part might have helped preempt the catas-

rophe that followed. Coordinating with Israel on matters relating to its security is one thing. Giving Israel a veto over American negotiating tactics and positions, particularly when it comes to bridging gaps between the two sides, is quite another.

If the new president adjusts his thinking when it comes to Israel, and is prepared to be tough with the Arabs as well, the next several years could be fascinating and productive ones. I hope so, because the national interest demands it.

The process of American mediation will be excruciatingly painful for Arabs, Israelis and Americans. But if done right, with toughness and fairness, it could produce the first real opportunity for a peace deal in many years.

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