

## The most excellent of all creations

A great man, the holy Prophet Muhammed (pbuh), had always been above all the petty envies and jealousies and prejudices that afflict the ordinary man. He was always dedicated to the noble ideals, selfless, truthful, fearless, meek as a lamb, but a lion in spirit.

SYED ASHRAF ALI

ON the auspicious day of Eid-e-Miladunnabi we celebrate the birthday of the holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), whose life has a special significance not only to the world of Islam but also to the whole of mankind. For God, in His infinite mercy, sent him Rahmatul-lil-Alameen -- a divine blessing not for one age or clime, but "for all mankind till the end of the world."

The teachings of Muhammad (pbuh) have left an impression so deep that it can never be effaced. Both Muslims and non-Muslim scholars and historians hail the Prophet of Islam as the greatest and most influential figure in history.

Religion in some form or other has always played a vital role in every society. Muhammad's (pbuh) contribution to mankind was to make religion a permanent force of vitality by giving it a natural and scientific basis and by differentiating between the real precepts of religion and the elements of superstition.

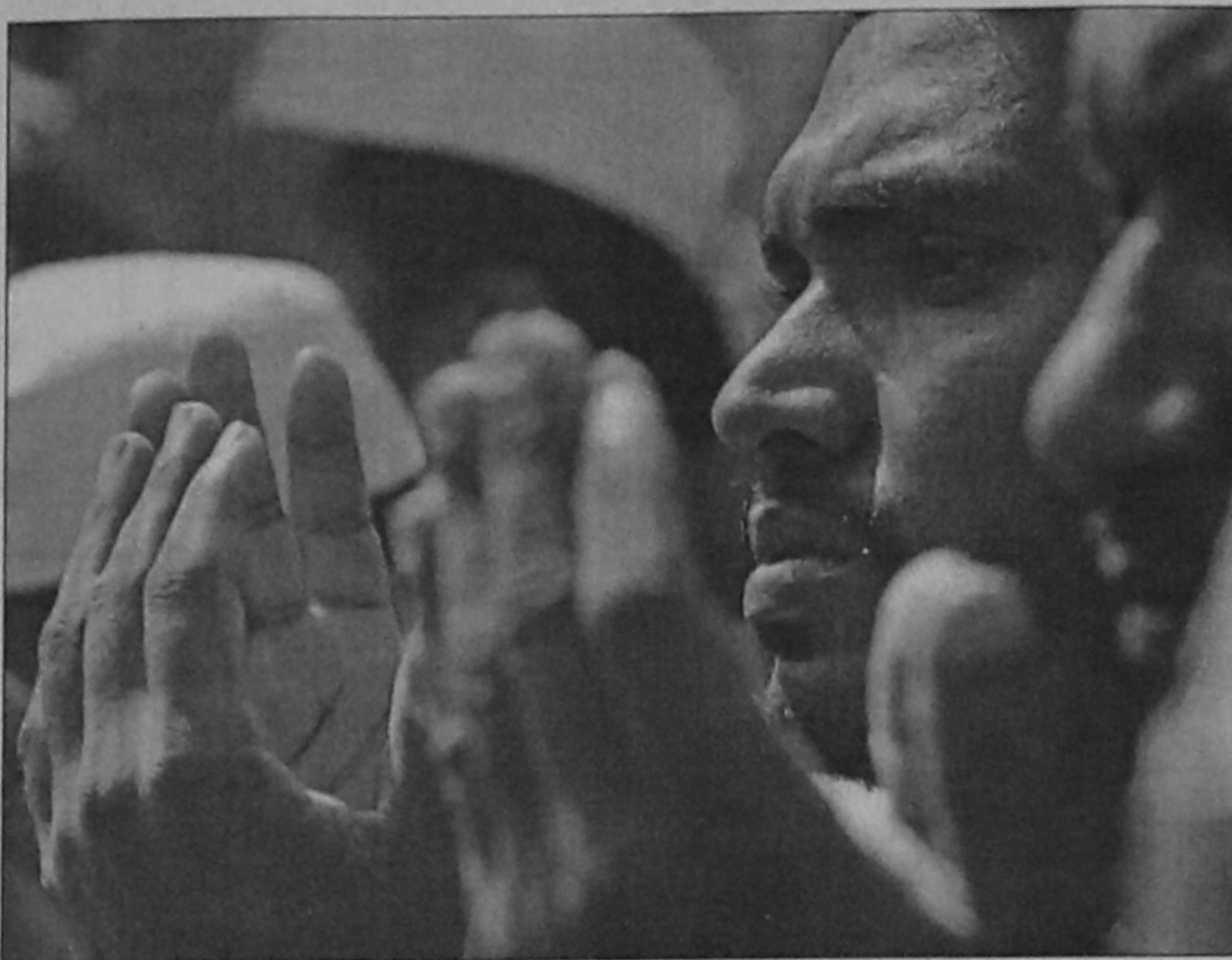
The Prophet had the foresightedness to emphasise the universal concepts of

the world's religions, such as the Unity of God, the unity of the human race, belief in the revealed scriptures, the emphatic assertion that every country and nation had a Prophet, and that all religious personalities should be venerated and respected.

The holy Prophet Jesus (pbuh), one of the greatest figures in the history of religion, who has since come to be worshipped as the son (or incarnation) of God, said: "A Prophet is not without honour, save in his own country and in his own house." (Matthew, 13:57).

To this universal rule, the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) proved to be the one and only exception. In the early days of his mission he had the unstinted support of his economically independent wife. In the fearful opposition of the Qureish extending over his thirteen years of preaching in Makkah, he enjoyed the loving protection of his unbelieving uncle, Abdul Muttalib. His devoted band of followers suffered inhuman persecution without recant, and would even migrate to unknown lands rather than compromise with their enemies.

Some were opposed to the radical



Followers of the greatest prophet.

reforms that his religion proposed, but neither faithful support nor ungrudging sacrifice was wanting from those who accepted him as the Apostle of God. Later, the number of his followers began to grow.

Towards the very end of his life, he went on a pilgrimage to Makkah and found himself in the midst of a vast concourse of ardent monotheists like himself, numbering 1,24,000, paying a similar visit to the ancient House of God. The historic Farewell Address delivered on this occasion, for its brevity and eloquence, mean-

ing life and profound grasp of the realities of life, surpasses all other sermons.

At the end of the sermon he asked his God, "O Lord, have I conveyed Your Message?" We know not what reply he received from his Lord, but the human beings that were listening to him with reverence and emotion replied in one voice, "By God, surely you have."

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man. He was always dedicated to the noble ideals, selfless, truthful, fearless, meek as a lamb, but a lion in spirit.

He always appealed to the noblest elements of our nature. Refusing to believe in the chief commonplaces of the then Arab cynicism, he called upon all to believe in One God and have faith in the fundamental values of life. It seems unbelievable that a man so dedicated, so truthful, so adventurous, so reckless of consequences, and yet so intensely practical, should have arisen in this benighted world of ours.

It is really difficult to estimate his historic achievements and amazing qualities of head and heart. The Herculean task would indeed be nothing short of churning a fathomless ocean. Memorable was his versatility, his many-sidedness.

Reformer, 'king', statesman, jurist, commander, arbitrator, adviser, patron of art and science, champion of women's rights, friend and guardian of the orphans, liberator of the slaves, protector of the non-Muslims, Muhammad (pbuh) was masterfully at home in many diverse fields.

Stanley Lane-Poole, who hails Muhammad (Pbuh) as "the most excellent of the creations of God," provides us with a beautiful graphic description of the tender virtues of the towering personage: "He was gifted with mighty powers of imagination, elevation of mind, delicacy and refinement of feeling." He was very indulgent to his inferiors. "Ten years," said Anas, his servant,

"was I with the Prophet and he never said as much as 'uff' to me." He was very fond of children; he would stop them in the streets and pat their little heads and never struck any one in his life.

It is the secular attitude of the Prophet of Islam (pbuh), which has perhaps enabled him to exert the greatest influence on the course of history. No threat or lure could deviate him from the straight Path towards the One and Only God. He was kind and merciful to followers of other religions -- always upholding the Qur'anic maxim that "there is no compulsion in religion." This attitude towards pluralism enabled him to permit sixty Christian delegates from Najran to offer their prayers right inside the Masjid-e-Nababi in Medinah when the holy Prophet himself was leading the Magrib prayers. His first secretary in Medinah was also a Jew.

It was this tolerance for other faiths, which encouraged him to permit a Jew named Mukhairik An-Nadari to take part in the holy Battle of Ohud against the Mushriks. No wonder the renowned astronomer and historian, Michael Hart, declared: "Mohammad was the only man in history who was supremely successful on both the religious and secular levels... It is this unparalleled combination of secular and religious influence which I feel entitles Muhammad to be considered the most influential single figure in history."

Syed Ashraf Ali is former DG of Islamic Foundation Bangladesh.

## A dangerous void in Pakistan

The crisis in Pakistan leaves the US with few policy options. Large injections of cash are desperately needed to give the government the time to reestablish the writ of the state and revive the moribund economy.

AHMED RASHID

JUST as the Obama administration tries to get a handle on Pakistan -- sorting out Afghanistan and defeating the Taliban -- the country takes another spiral downwards. Almost in a mirror image of the financial crisis that galloped ahead of the solutions that governments devised, the situation in Pakistan deteriorates at a pace faster than policymakers can grasp. Most worrisome in the developing crisis is the leadership void in Pakistan.

The governmental weakness was demonstrated dramatically recently while Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi took part in a crucial meeting with the US and Afghanistan, back home the government virtually ceded control of part of the country to the Taliban.

The meeting was designed to input policy options before Richard Holbrooke, the US Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan which President Barack Obama is supposed to sell to Nato at its summit on April 2.

In Pakistan, a controversial ceasefire with Taliban militants was on the verge of breaking down, economic indicators spiraled down further and the Supreme Court's verdict to disqualify Nawaz Sharif

from taking part in politics, plunged the country into fresh political crisis. A terrible week was capped by a terrorist attack on the visiting Sri Lankan cricket team in the heart of Lahore.

Hopes that the 2008 election of the democratic and secular Pakistan Peoples Party government would bring political parties together have been thwarted by the PPP trying to isolate the long-time rival Sharif brothers.

The Sharifs are now rallying their supporters to join lawyers who plan a protest in Islamabad to reinstate the former Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudry, but to try and topple Zardari.

With such crisis, US policy options to help Pakistan are more difficult to ascertain. President Obama told that Pakistan "was endangered as much as we are." The expansion of the Pakistani Taliban across northern Pakistan and the safety that the Afghan Taliban and Al Qaeda have on the borders present a major global security threat.

Both the government and the army have already agreed to a controversial ceasefire in the Swat valley east of Federal Administered Tribal Area and just 100 miles from Islamabad.

The deal has been struck with Maulana Sufi Mohammed, a radical cleric freed last

year. He led a peace march through Swat to convince his son-in-law Maulana Fazlullah, who leads the Swati contingent of the Pakistani Taliban and is closely allied to Al Qaeda, to accept the government's offer of a ceasefire in exchange for enforcement of Sharia law in the valley.

The US is adamantly opposed to such ceasefires while the exhausted and demoralised Pakistan army welcomes them. The government insists the legal change will be a limited application of Islamic justice through the local courts, the Taliban interpret it as allowing full application of Sharia law for all aspects of education, administration and law and order in the region.

Fazlullah's men, aided by Uzbek, Chechen and Arab jihadis fought bloody battles with the army over the past two years, finally driving the army out and taking control of most of Swat last year. The fighting has led to some 1200 civilian deaths and the forced exodus of an estimated 350,000 people out of a population of 1.5 million. Fazlullah has blown up 200 girls schools, hanged policemen and teachers, set up Sharia courts and now runs a parallel government.

Even though the former military regime of President Pervez Musharraf concluded several controversial short lived ceasefires with the Pakistani Taliban, the government never previously conceded major changes to the legal or political system.

The peace deal has become an explosive issue in Pakistan: Right wing, religious-minded citizens and politicians praise it for bringing peace to Swat, while liberal Pakistanis see it as an unmitigat-

able watershed in the country's battle against Islamic extremism, giving Al Qaeda and the Taliban a new safe haven.

Swat is vital for the militants because it is well out of range of US drones, which successfully attack their leaders in FATA. Pakistan has objected to the US use of drones to bomb its territory and it will be politically unacceptable if the US extends drone attacks in Swat, several hundred miles from the Afghan border.

The Taliban are unlikely to stop with Swat. From FATA, the Taliban have already expanded their influence into the settled areas of North West Frontier Province and virtually laid siege to the capital Peshawar.

To add to the US and NATO woes three rival Pakistani Taliban leaders, who have fought the Pakistan army on and off since it deployed into FATA in 2004, have formed a new alliance called the Shura-e-Ittehad ul Mujaheddin or Council of United Holy Warriors.

Under the influence of Mullah Mohammed Omar, the Afghan Taliban leader who also has a sanctuary in Pakistan, the new council aims to broker ceasefires with the Pakistan army so that both the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban can concentrate their firepower on the 17,000 new US troops being sent to Afghanistan in spring by the Obama administration.

The US military is trying to convince the army to retrain some of its regular forces in modern counter insurgency tactics. Last year after months of dialogue the army allowed the US to retrain and re-equip its paramilitary Frontier Corps, but not regular forces because it



Into the abyss?

considers India a larger threat still expecting a conventional war.

Meanwhile extremist attacks like the one in Lahore only further depress the economy which faces increasing joblessness, inflation and capital flight. Last year Pakistan received a two year US\$7.6 billion IMF loan, but any hope for bilateral aid from Europe and other donors has not materialised so far.

The Obama administration has promised Pakistan US\$1.5 billion a year for the next five years, but it will take many months before the US Congress will make such money available, while conditions Congress will likely impose -- such as decisively combating extremism -- Pakistan may be unwilling or

unable to fulfill.

The crisis in Pakistan leaves the US with few policy options. Large injections of cash are desperately needed to give the government the time to reestablish the writ of the state and revive the moribund economy. Yet the real issue which Obama certainly cannot address is the lack of leadership in a country that teeters on the edge of chaos.

Ahmed Rashid is a Pakistani journalist and author, most recently of "Descent into Chaos: The US and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia."

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## Arrows in the air

The truth is that no one, not even someone whose life has been steeped in electoral politics, really knows what is going to happen on May 16. We are all shooting arrows in the air, and if one of them lands on the target, the lucky chap will pretend he has been an Olympic champion sharpshooter. Until the next elections.

M.J. AKBAR

WHAT happens when Sharad Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party woos the Shiv Sena's patriarch Bal Thackeray with cut glass and high-quality watches? Does Pawar become communal or does Thackeray become secular?

What do Rahul Gandhi and Sharad Pawar discuss when they are on a sight-seeing tour of Pawar's factories? Do they stick to the welfare of the local community and the potential for agrobusiness? Or do they also discuss which one of them could become prime minister in case Manmohan Singh thinks, once the votes are in and the verdict is the expected mishmash, that he simply does not feel healthy enough to carry the burden of a cabinet that consists not of equals but of opposites?

I can't imagine that they would be saying pahle aap to each other. In fact, a close confidante of Pawar, Govindrao Adik, might have indicated what is on the former's mind by suggesting that Rahul Gandhi should be an apprentice -- a sort

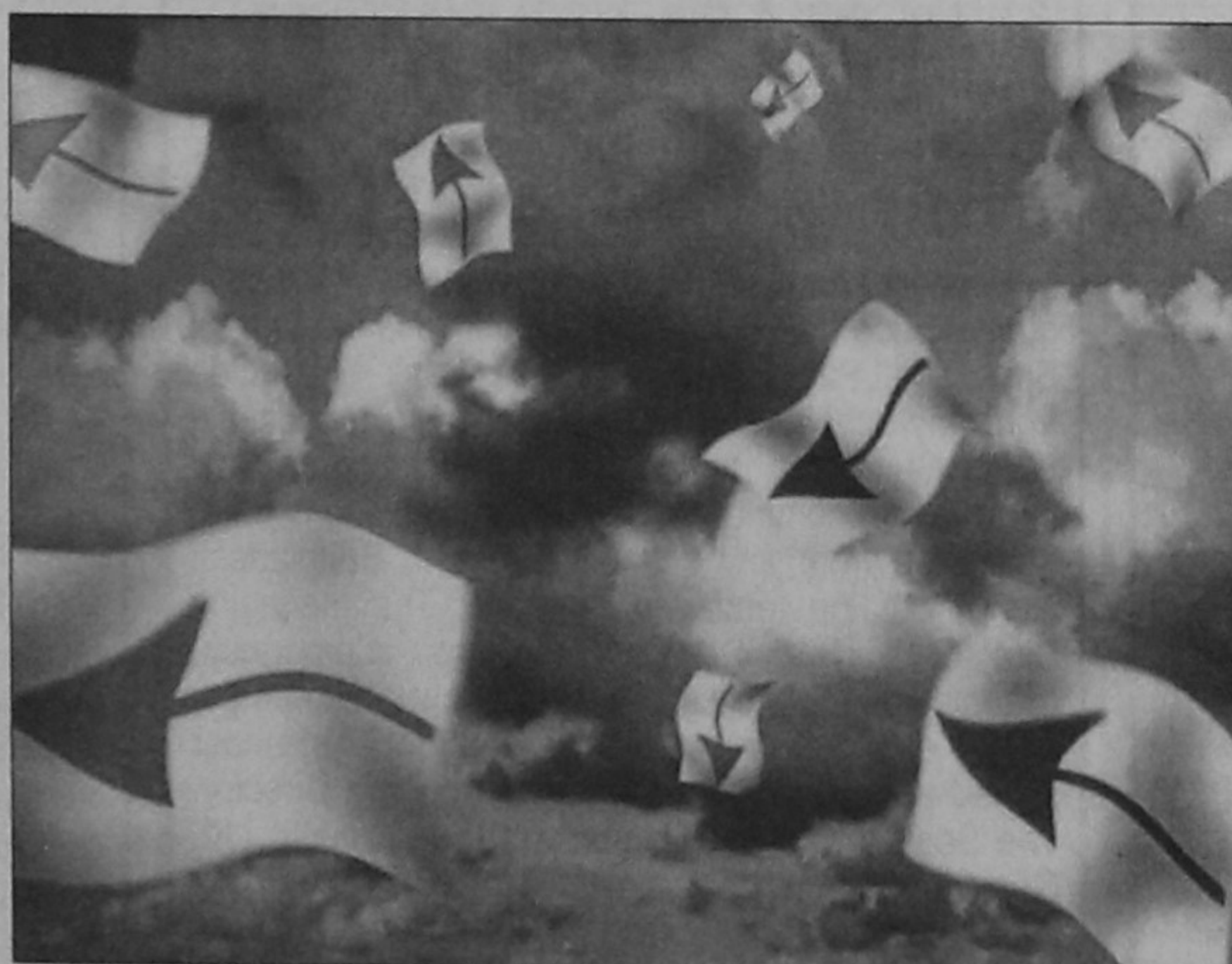
of trainee prime minister -- for ten years under Pawar so that he can understand the fibre of the ropes that bind this nation.

Sharad Pawar is not alone in declaring his bid for the prime ministership after the 2009 general elections. Lalu Yadav has not hidden such ambitions, although he may be hampered this year by the awkward possibility that his party's tally may not enter double digits.

The thought also seems to have crossed the mind of his Bihar colleague Ram Vilas Paswan. Leaders outside the UPA have been a shade more discreet, but lack of transparency should not mean that they would not grasp at the chair if the mildest glimmer of a chance came their way.

H.D. Deve Gowda is surely checking up on the number of auspicious days in May with his astrologer. In fact, the only person not checking up with any astrologer is probably the declared NDA nominee for the job, L.K. Advani, not because he doesn't want the job but because he doesn't want to be near astrologers.

Compare this with the situation five years ago. The parties that later created



On whom will one fall?

the UPA, including the Congress and its electoral allies, entered the last general election without anyone in the starring role of potential prime minister. Sonia Gandhi was hesitant; Rahul Gandhi was too young; and no one else was bothered by the thought.

What does this rash of potential PMs indicate? First, Pawar and leaders of the middle space between the Congress and the BJP seem quite confident that neither the Congress nor the BJP will get enough seats to become the uncontested claimants for the post.

It is natural for a politician like Pawar to feel that parties against him -- in this case the BJP -- will lose. What is significant is that he should feel that the Congress is sinking. If Pawar thought that the Congress would get 160 seats, or even retain what it has in the present parliament, he would not be wasting his breath or pumping up the expectations of his party.

He is also very certain that without a substantial victory the Congress will not be able to claim the office for Rahul Gandhi. He is equally sanguine that the

present combination of the UPA will not get a majority on its own, and therefore will need support from parties in the Third Front as well as in the NDA. He is sure that his personal contacts will make him the magnet for the next coalition.

He is unperturbed by ideology. The principal glue of the UPA was a common desire to keep the BJP out of office, but Pawar has jumped across the BJP and moved to its extreme by reaching out to the Shiv Sena. It will be interesting to see whether this affects Muslim support for him in the coming elections. It would be illogical if it did not, but then logic is not always the main motivator for the electorate.

One reason why this general election seems enervating rather than energising, or even enigmatic, is because of a growing consensus in the political class that it will be a fractured House with no clear winner. The results of May 16 are seen as a starting point on the road to power, not as a destination. The game has begun for the results of the elections.

Is there anyone in the current play-list who could change the nature of the post-result game? Yes, Mayawati. This is not the first time that she is being underestimated. No one expected her to get a simple majority in the assembly elections. Conventional wisdom is giving her around 35 seats. This was the projection made by the Times of India. But her formula still has legs. All her Muslim candidates -- and she has got some formidable names -- will get their community's vote.

Despite talk to the contrary, the state's

Brahmins have not quite deserted her. Some fluctuations in the vote are inevitable from election to election, but there is no evidence that the broad pattern has changed drastically. Her supporters believe that her tally will be closer to 50 than 35. She is also going to damage the prospects of others in a crucial state like Maharashtra where the big boys are not taking her corrosive threat as seriously as they should.

Memories are poor. We tend to forget that the incumbent UPA government was a post-election phenomenon, patched together after the results were declared. The election of Dr. Manmohan Singh as prime minister was the surprise of the decade. Why should we be surprised if there is another surprise?

Further thought: the prospect of the unusual should not blind one to the possible success of the usual. Since we are getting ready for a surprise we might be surprised if there is in the end no surprise. All options are possible. There could be many permutations before there will be a combination; and an existing combination could make permutations irrelevant.

The truth is that no one, not even someone whose life has been steeped in electoral politics, really knows what is going to happen on May 16. We are all shooting arrows in the air, and if one of them lands on the target, the lucky chap will pretend he has been an Olympic champion sharpshooter. Until the next elections.

M.J. Akbar is Director, Cover Publications.