

Of lease and largesse

It is not a secret that a huge number of buildings in Dhaka, Chittagong and Khulna, amongst others, that were declared abandoned after liberation had subsequently been taken out of government control by influential quarters through illegal means.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

A house in Dhaka Cantonment, leased twenty-eight years ago to the widow of a slain president under unusual circumstances and apparently without carefully examining the legal and administrative requirements, has raised a political storm that might not bode well for our fledgling democracy. Concerned citizens entertain such a premonition because, sadly, there is no clear understanding and appreciation of the difference between public propriety and private gain -- the ruling class not excluded.

Leasing out state property to individuals, though not a desirable practice from a policy point of view, has its own dimension in Bangladesh. This writer can recollect one interesting transaction of early 1975, in which a serving police officer was allotted a house in Chittagong (possibly

an abandoned property) in recognition of his services for apprehending a dreaded underground leader.

The above allotment could not be effectively formalised before the tragic happenings of August 1975 due to the objections of bureaucrats in the ministry of public works, who considered such action unprecedented and unhealthy despite the expressed wish of the then chief executive.

They stuck to their views in the post-August 1975 period, but when the matter reached the final stage the then chief executive approved the allotment with the observation that, despite being appreciative of the arguments for not agreeing to the proposal, he deemed it necessary to honour the commitment of the former president.

There have been allotments of government properties to individuals or groups which one would not find very convinc-

ing or justified in the public interest. Those did not attract enough media attention to warrant public discussion.

It is not a secret that a huge number of buildings in Dhaka, Chittagong and Khulna, amongst others, that were declared abandoned after liberation had subsequently been taken out of government control by influential quarters through illegal means. The protectors and custodians turned into violators. These buildings that could be put to real public use were deliberately lost to private gain.

It would also appear to the discerning eye that in matters of doling out favours or awarding largesse, our establishment has not been able to shake off the feudal mentality, and we do not realise that we live in a democratic republic. Gone are the days when all the lands belonged to the emperor, and he could distribute those at will to the obedient and to cronies. There has to be an application of mind coupled with the preservation of the scale of justice.

While it would possibly be the apex court of justice of the country that would pronounce the ultimate judgment on the legality or otherwise of the lease to the widow of a slain president, it is quite disconcerting to see national level leaders across the political divide, including legal minds, making loud political statements

for and against the lease. The whole issue has acquired a political colour in our sharply polarised society, thereby rendering it extremely difficult for the citizens to dispassionately ascertain the actual liability.

The situation following the cabinet decision to cancel the lease of the cantonment house of the leader of the opposition has been further compounded by utterances of responsible leaders describing the lease cancellation as a vengeful act. The argument is that since the allotment of Gonobhavan to present the prime minister in 2001 was cancelled, a retaliatory action has been taken by her by canceling the lease of the cantonment house of the leader of opposition.

Under circumstances as above, one has to be clear about the relevant actions and their legality. While the irregularity in allotting Gonobhavan is understood, it is not clear as to how that action could be related to the recent action of cancellation of the lease of cantonment house. In other words, should one presume that the unusual allotment of Gonobhavan in 2001 can be subject to official scrutiny but unusual and allegedly improper actions of yesteryears cannot be questioned.

Instances as above bring to the fore the unfair and often ludicrous facets of our public affairs. Comparisons are odious,



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but when one refers to the issue of sentimental attachment to the cantonment house owing to its being occupied by late President Ziaur Rahman, one has to similarly appreciate the fond memories of Bongobondhu with the Gonobhavan. If sentiments have to prevail, then all our stately mansions will in no time turn into private residences. Obviously, this cannot be an acceptable scenario.

It is time to firmly establish the distinc-

tion between private desire and public propriety. Is it not time to appreciate the simplicity of the life style of politicians in our neighbourhood, wherein many live in rented houses and do not own any property in the city? Should not humility be the hallmark of our leaders as against conspicuous consumption and ostentatious living?

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a columnist of The Daily Star.

State of education: The erosion must be checked

It is now common knowledge that a household in urban areas spends at least half of their income on private teachers at the primary and secondary level and take out a miserable living either by taking loan or adjusting the shortfall through some other means.

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

EDUCATION in schools, colleges and universities in the country has turned out to be wasteful exercises leaving the young learners handicapped and ill-suited to face the tests of life, either in the job market and/or more specifically as teachers in academic institutions. That underscores the fact that parents are overly concerned with getting the best possible education for their wards.

Statistics taken from urban centres reveal that parents are spending too much on improving their offspring's prospects. The result however is dismal. Few of those who manage to get the certificates and degrees land good jobs.

Speaking of school level education, it is now common knowledge that a household in urban areas spends at least half of their income on private teachers at the primary and secondary level and take out a miserable living either by taking loan or adjusting the shortfall through some other means. This spending is hardly being paid off. The coaching centres are doing lucrative business. With each student paying Taka 1000 to 2000 for each subject at the secondary level, these centres net a big sum of money but the

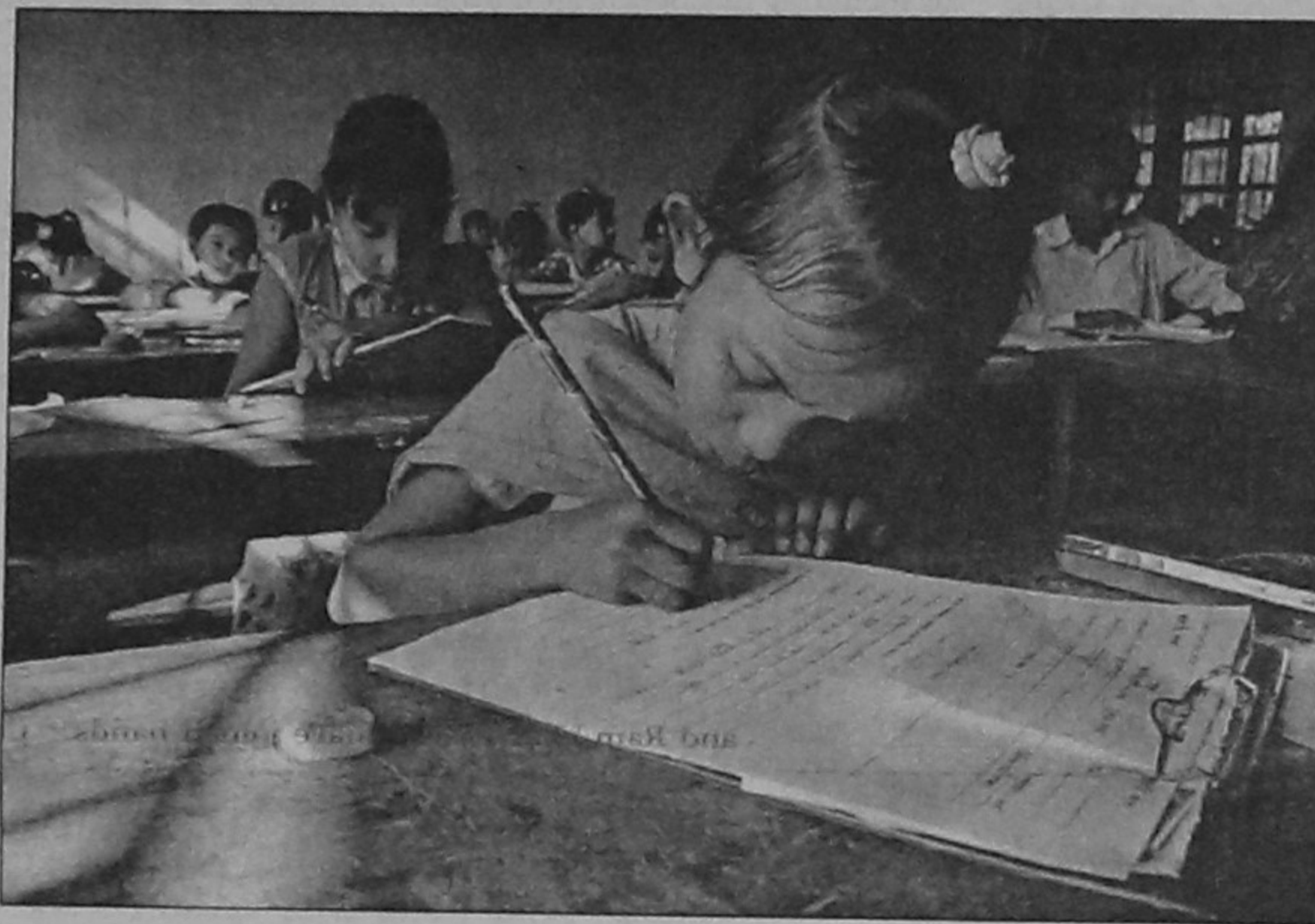
quality of their product is anything but happy.

Yet, there is hardly any second thought about the fact that people in the country want their children to be educated. But should it come so much at the cost of their economic, downturn or, should, such endeavours put them only in dire straits?

Reports gleaned from some prosperous countries in the Asian region definitely would inspire the parents in the country and call for government action to herald a change. In South Korea that ranks as one of the "Asian Tigers," the government has taken steps to rein in parents it feels are spending too much on improving their offspring's prospects. They are banning private tutors in subjects other than arts and music for students below university level.

The objective is that the government wants to curb excessive spending on tutors as a measure to promote egalitarianism among students by disallowing parents a chance to 'buy' their children superior education.

Opinion polls reveal that many people in the country are opposed to private tutoring, especially at the primary stage. Bad tutoring, or faulty lessons or lessons in the form of 'capsule' dished out at this stage saps the mental vigour, intelligence,



What are they being taught?

merit and awareness of a child about his or her surroundings. It is only through dissemination of sound education at this stage that a society can attain the skills and discipline needed for an economic battle that awaits its people at a later stage of their life.

Left in the hands of a tutor who hardly makes any effort to understand a child's mores, psychology, impulsiveness and inquisitiveness, a child's schooling or grooming is likely to end up in disaster and that only underscores that spending on tutors that amounts to costly sacrifices by the parents often turn out to be wasteful expenditures.

Without any respite parents would continue to do so as long as schools -- private and public, are not doing their job

properly. And it is at this juncture that the present elected government's action as regards sound planning and creating a sound base for primary and secondary education is needed.

So says an enraged affluent parent, "I'm in no mood to have my children educated in the country where syllabus and curriculum are changed so frequently and schools fail to fulfil their duties." That's about an affluent parent but what fate awaits a parent who does not have adequate means to send his child to such an elite school as may take care of his ward in exchange for money he should invest?

This pinpoints the responsibility of the government that must provide in public what parents are obliged to buy privately.

The reluctance or dilly-dallying of the past government in implementing a sound education policy has far reaching consequences that the administration has failed to realise so long.

The PSC report made public recently revealed that the performances of our boys in the public service examinations have dipped low. On the other hand sensible citizenry are dismayed by the loss of bright young boys to education overseas. At least hundreds and thousands of our boys are migrating to foreign countries for their schooling and in search of a life that is apparently absent in the country.

Few countries can take satisfaction from such migration of their best and the brightest. In the process we lose not only the resources of those who leave but also the confidence and commitment of those who remain. Undeniably true, with the children staying abroad either for schooling or in job, the commitment and patriotism of the (wealthy) parents are bound to be tainted and mixed. So said an affluent businessman who owns several industries including some garments factories in the country, "I am exporting money from Bangladesh to the US."

The newly elected government must respond to this sorry state of affairs in the education sector with pragmatism and farsightedness. In their effort to unveil a sound education policy suited to build a 'Digital Bangladesh,' they are pledge-bound to create a uniform educational base starting from the primary to the secondary level. Unless we can frame an education policy that ensures equal rights and opportunities for all sections of the society, the vision 20-21 would just remain a utopian dream.

The country's educational authorities in their changed mindset must now work on improving the quality of education. To cash in what has become a lucrative business, a large number of these coaching centres are allegedly recruiting teachers without minimum qualification, experience and commitment.

These coaching centres are not recognised by the government, they don't pay taxes although they are making huge incomes and are run without the most basic of facilities. Little wonder then that these educational institutions are producing sub-standard and incompetent products.

To put them at different important organisations is a national risk. And the risk is spreading. Even the recognised schools and colleges strapped for cash, and their teachers supposedly bereft of morality and ethical values and too keen to make quick fortune, are engaged in a messy business. Since quality of education has fallen, corruption in teaching and examination affairs to the extent of selling fake certificates seems to be going rampant.

It should be stressed further that unless teacher training is conducted on a national scale under the new education policy with objective to disseminate uniform education for all, the aim of good quality education will remain an elusive dream. The nation can't afford any further wastage or erosion of its talented and vibrant human resources that with infusion of fund and proper nurturing can turn out to be a gigantic force for the development of the country.

Asadullah Khan is a former teacher of Physics and Controller of Examinations. Email: aukhanbd@gmail.com.

Obama's Pak-Afghan quandary

It is to President Obama's credit that, despite strong pressures emerging from various quarters, he has rejected all of these alternatives in favour of building an effective democratic state in Afghanistan.

ASHLEY J. TELLIS

DESPITE opposition from many within the Democratic Party and the White House against deepening US involvement in Afghanistan, President Obama has courageously decided to fight this war -- using, as he put it, "all elements of our national power to defeat al Qaeda, and to defend

America, our allies, and all who seek a better future."

In a White Paper, his administration has affirmed that Washington aims "to disrupt, dismantle, and eventually destroy extremists and their safe havens" within the "Af-Pak" region because doing so constituted America's "vital national security interest." All this is good, but by failing to admit, out of political conve-

nience, that the United States will engage in nation-building in Afghanistan -- even as Obama embarks on just that mission -- the president risks undermining his own strategy.

Comprehensive engagement in Afghanistan was opposed by a variety of constituencies. Senator John Kerry (D-Mass.) warned against any reconstruction intended "to make (Afghanistan) our 51st state," suggesting instead that allied objectives in that country be limited to ensuring that "it does not become an al-Qaeda narco-state and terrorist beach-head capable of destabilising neighbouring Pakistan."

David Boaz of the libertarian Cato Institute wondered whether the US would "be able to extricate (itself) sooner if we accept a decentralised Afghanistan with some regions ruled by groups that are currently fighting against our troops?" And, one senior Nato official, reflecting the view of many European governments eager to end their involvement in Afghanistan, has been quoted by the Guardian as arguing that Kabul "doesn't need to be a democracy, just secure."

It is to President Obama's credit that, despite strong pressures emerging from various quarters, he has rejected all of these alternatives in favour of building an effective democratic state in Afghanistan. That is the good news. If success in Afghanistan -- understood as the extirpation of al-Qaeda and the marginalisation of the Taliban as an armed opposition -- is to be achieved, Washington and its partners will have no choice but to erect an effective Afghan state that can control its

national territory and deliver its citizens security, responsive governance, and economic development necessary to ensure internal stability.

Obama's new "Af-Pak" policy suggests that he has understood this clearly and his administration's White Paper corroborates his intention to pursue precisely this goal. The bad news, however, is that the administration has spelled this out only indistinctly and by circumlocution.

President Obama has asserted that the United States will have a "clear and focused goal," namely, "to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future." Toward this end, he has rejected any "return to Taliban rule;" he has upheld the need for "a more capable, accountable, and effective government in Afghanistan that serves the Afghan people;" and he has endorsed the objective of "developing increasingly self-reliant Afghan security forces that can lead the counterinsurgency and counterterrorism fight with reduced US assistance."

Whether explicitly admitted or not, these propositions indicate that US will not abdicate state building in Afghanistan; will not recognise the Taliban as an acceptable Islamist group in contrast to, for example, al-Qaeda; and will not exit Afghanistan either as an end in itself or to better focus on Pakistan, as some analysts have suggested.

The administration's reiteration of the need for "a more capable, accountable, and effective government in Afghanistan" also implicitly conveys a rejection of all

ambiguous strategies of governance, a refusal to integrate an unrepentant Taliban into any Afghan organs of rule, and a decisive repudiation of authoritarianism as a solution to the political problems in Kabul.

But, the failure to transparently declare that the United States is committed to building an effective democratic state in Afghanistan -- a circumvention owed probably as much to appeasing fears within the Democratic Party as it is to calming Nato partners about nation-building -- has opened the door to unreasonable expectations that his strategy for defeating terrorism in Afghanistan (and Pakistan) can be implemented without, what the New York Times calls, "the vast attempt at nation-building (that) the Bush administration had sought in Iraq."

As the civilian surge already underway in Afghanistan suggests, the administration understands that successful counterterrorism needs successful state building. But the failure to own up to this could prove to be the strategy's undoing -- within Congress and among the allies. Accordingly, the president should clarify this ambiguity at the earliest opportunity.

Entertaining the notion of "exit strategy," as President Obama himself has done previously, is dangerous because it will spur the insurgents to outlast the international coalition; encourage important Afghan bystanders to persist in their prevailing ambivalence; and be a disincentive to Islamabad to relinquishing its support for the Taliban because after the US withdrawal they may once again be required to protect Pakistan's

interests in Kabul.

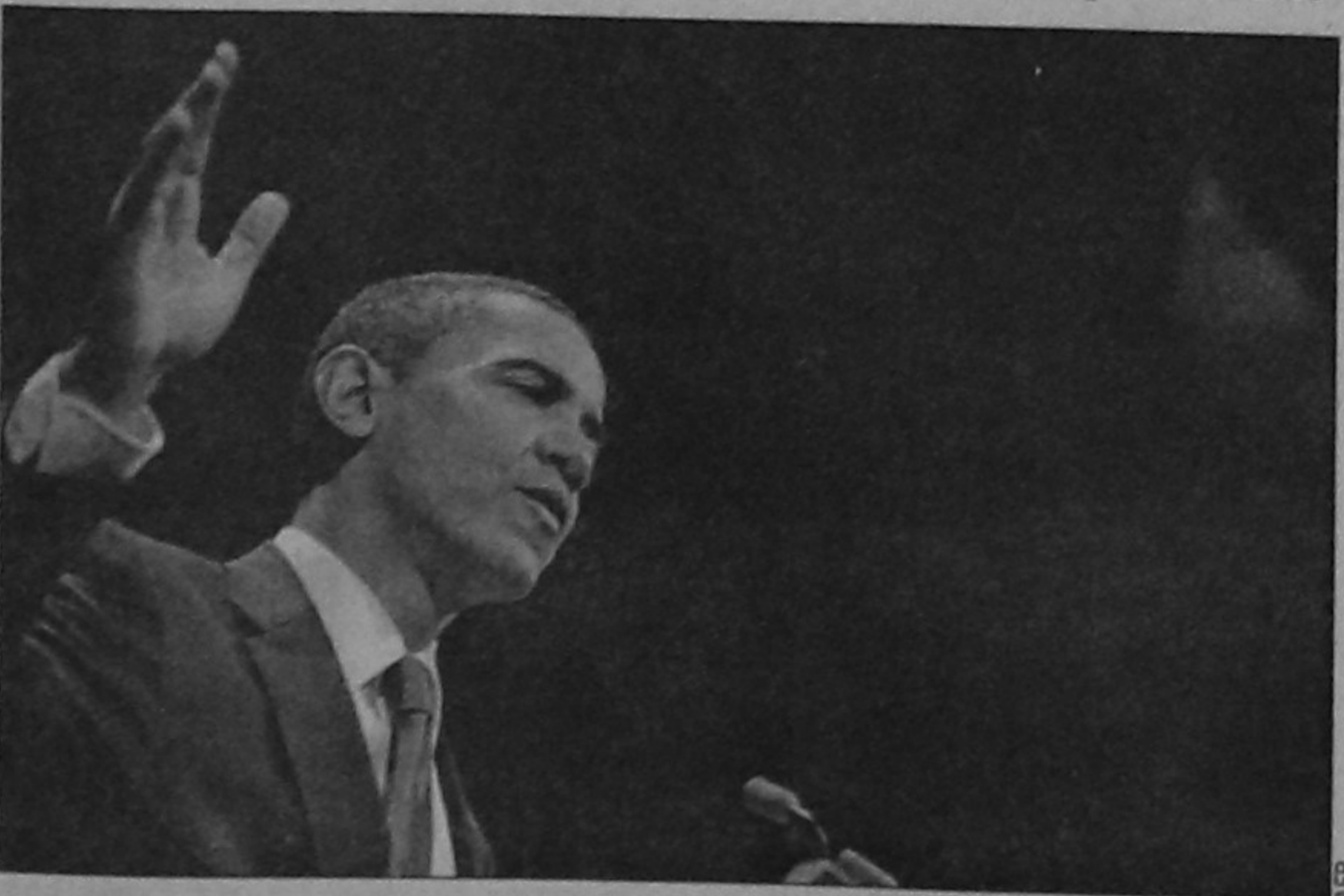
To demonstrate that he is serious, however, Obama must also do more beyond what he has already committed to doing. He needs to commit far more American troops to Afghanistan than the 55,000-odd soldiers that will soon be present in the theater, if the counterinsurgency campaign in the southern and eastern Afghan provinces is to be successful.

He needs to build the Afghan National Army to an end-strength of about 250,000 soldiers if the appropriate force-to-population ratios needed for the counterinsurgency are to be sustained. He needs to revamp considerably the current command and control arrangements pertaining to both military operations and civil-military coordination in Afghanistan.

He needs to work with Kabul to improve quickly the quality of governance and the delivery of services to the people most hit by the Taliban insurgency. And, he needs to jettison those old and tired saws that reconciliation with the Taliban or better counterterrorism performance by Pakistan will be essential for success in Afghanistan; although both may well be true, neither is particularly likely and, consequently, Obama ought to refocus on securing victory in Afghanistan by "hardening" it from the inside out rather than by counting on either Taliban or Pakistani cooperation.

Ashley J. Tellis is a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the author of *Reconciling with the Taliban? Toward an Alternative Grand Strategy in Afghanistan*.

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