

A mixed bag

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S. I. ZAMAN

I never had any illusions! Nevertheless, I felt that it was rather premature to criticise the new government because they needed some time to set up the new administration. The election victory was indeed comprehensive. I felt a bit sanguine that perhaps Bangladesh was inching towards a new beginning. Certainly, some of the PM's initial political gestures reinforced that optimism. Nevertheless, some failings have begun to emerge.

The Local Government bill is perceived to be a volte-face from their manifesto pledge. The bone of contention is that local government might be weakened -- MPs might have a "field day" with their self-serving agenda -- which might create tension between the local government and the centre.

The fundamental premise of democracy is that the government is endowed with a mindset that reflects tolerance for a differing view, and a sense of responsibility towards the state and the people. In an ideal world, the local body and the MP would function in a symbiotic relation-

ship. Local bodies would perform an executive role rather than a legislative role in that they would implement policies made by the centre. And certainly this execution would be carried out under the supervision of the MP. Thus the MPs have a supervisory role.

In reality, there is no mutually accepted demarcation as to where the authority of one ends and that of the other begins. The implication that the local body is subordinate to the MP is tacit, provided, of course, the MP can rise above any partisan or self-seeking design. And that's a tall order!

As soon as the new administration took over, Chhatro League (CL) got busy ensuring that the non-CLs and the non-partisans know who is running the show now, thus creating a reign of terror on campuses across the nation. This is certainly an embarrassment for the party in power.

For the country to move on and indeed, for the ruling party to have some credibility, the CL must stop behaving like a feral mob. Sadly, the government was too slow in responding. Nevertheless, as a political gesture, the PM has stepped down as the head of the CL -- raising some eye-brows,

of course! But, will she take stern action against the perpetrators?

This myopic and warped mindset that plagues CL and other student's parties is turning the campuses into breeding grounds for potential terrorists, and certainly not into sanctuaries of the noble pursuit of knowledge. The CL and indeed other student's fronts should get the message that their mindless acts are deemed a menace to any democracy and, indeed, to any civilised society. No longer are they the standard bearers of their glorious past!

It's a moot question whether or not the lease of Begum Zia's residence has any legitimacy. However, at a time when there are much greater issues of grave concern at national level, why open a new front? What is so pressing that the issue of this particular house needs resolving right now? How critically is this a national issue that it couldn't wait for the dust to settle? The opposition is itching to get its show on the road, and now it has found a reason.

I find here unreasonableness on both camps. It is unfair of the PM to bring out an issue that may be perceived as settling of personal scores, thus demeaning her position; and it's equally so of the opposition to threaten to launch a nationwide mass protest. A nationwide fight for a person's residence? I fail to see how this issue could, even remotely, come under the "job description" of an opposition party in any democracy.

This issue needs to be settled in court and certainly does not warrant a nation-

wide mass protest, which nearly always turns out ugly! And surely, there are other issues (local government bill, BDR enquiry findings yet to emerge, farmers' plight in the wake of lower food price, bail-out plan etc.) against which BNP could justifiably make some useful noise -- they owe it to the nation!

That the ACC chairman, H. M. Chowdhury (HMC), would go was a foregone conclusion. What surprised me was why he waited for three months after the return of a political government. Was he under an illusion that ACC would function as it had before? Or was it to give the administration some time?

The ACC chairman said that he was stepping down for "personal reasons." Perhaps it is so! Perhaps, his resignation has nothing to do with what went on between him and the government. Perhaps, the smear campaign against him by certain MPs (from both camps) did not prompt this. Perhaps, the law minister's unkind and untimely comments against him didn't precipitate this. Perhaps not!

But the people are not as naïve and docile as they were before 1/11. I have said before that for an ACC to function independently is axiomatically a non-starter! When the premise is wrong what good is the thesis? It is a general perception that many of the political, bureaucratic and corporate elite are either corrupt or predisposed to shady deals, and an independent ACC is a thorn in the velvety cushion of their power.

The government has, of course, denied



The reins must be in her hands.

any pressure which might have precipitated this -- and the opposition parties have welcomed his departure for obvious reasons. Both political camps seem to be in tacit agreement that HMC's departure was "good riddance." However, what is most unfortunate is that the two major parties could never unite on national crises -- they squabble, they bicker and

they seek political gain out of any crisis. So why this agreement on the departure of HMC?

The answer is quite simple. He was turning into an "inconvenience" for both the ruling party and the opposition.

Dr. S. I. Zaman is a University Professor writing from the Middle East.

Tackling the water crisis

The use of rainwater is environment-friendly. We will not need to extract water from underground if we can use the rainwater and the surface water surrounding the city. The use of this natural water will save underground water, which we can use during the summer.

M.M. BILLAH

DHAKA suffers from water shortage all the year round but city dwellers have taken it as part of their life, so they don't raise a hue and cry. But in summer it gets terribly acute and the people come out to the streets with empty pots and pitchers.

Wasa, the government, and civil society arrange seminars and newspapers publish articles on the crisis. The government as usual says that it has taken measures to mitigate the sufferings of the city dwellers, adding that it has happened due to the corruption of the previous government. When the rainy season comes and

the crisis is averted, all kinds of discussions come to a standstill.

To meet the demand for water of more than ten million people is a gigantic task. Wasa says that Dhaka needs 205 crore litres of water every day and they can supply only 194 crore litres. It adds that 85% of the water is extracted from underground. In 2001, deep tubewells could strike water at a depth of 200 to 300 feet, but now they have to go down to 1,000 feet. The water level is going down, threatening serious environmental hazards. It is unfortunate that our leaders don't show any concern about this situation.

We have plenty of rainfall during the rainy season and even in the summer.



Can rainwater help overcome the crisis?

Rainwater can be used properly to ease the burden on the groundwater. How can we utilise it?

All the buildings from middle to high-

rise must have a system to pass all the rainwater to underground water reservoirs. When all the middle and high-rise building start using rainwater, a huge

amount of Wasa water will be saved. The people of small houses must store rainwater in special pots.

During the rainy season the city is surrounded by water, which can be used during the rainy season. Wasa extracts ground water throughout the year, without considering the fact that it causes serious environmental damage.

The use of rainwater is environment-friendly. We will not need to extract water from underground if we can use the rainwater and the surface water surrounding the city. The use of this natural water will save underground water, which we can use during the summer. Stopping misuse of water is a must.

Recycling of water is one of the best solutions. Now it is a must. The situation has reached such a stage that we cannot afford to lose more time in adopting it. All the used water will be stored in reservoirs around the city, and filtered through a system that will separate the water and filth. The water will be kept in the reservoir for treatment and the filth and dirt will be used for making manure.

It will definitely be manure of the first water, and the system will be financially profitable. Of course, it will be expensive to establish such a system, but we can do it with the help of donors, local entrepreneurs and NGOs.

To meet the present crisis, water has to be brought from the rivers far from the city. To purify this water chlorine and other chemicals will be needed. Seawater should be treated and purified instead of underground water. Such a water treatment system was used by American marines after the devastating cyclone Sidi.

Trees should be planted in the city wherever possible to make the environment water-friendly. All the lakes of the city must be cleaned and re-excavated to hold more water. If the water of all the lakes of Dhaka city can be made pure, it will not only help keep our water level reasonable but also the poorest people can bathe there.

Md. Masum Billah is Senior Manager, Brac Education Programme, PACE.

What next, after a Colombo victory?

Yet, as Sri Lanka rejoices in the elimination of the dreaded Tigers and the killer their leader turned out to be, there is a sobering thought: What happens to Tamils and their legitimate demands? Who will speak for them now?

RAVI VELOOR

So, it looks like Sri Lanka's quarter century of convulsions may finally be drawing to a close. Velupillai Prabhakaran, the charismatic fighter who organised a motley band of Tamil youth into the world's most dreaded guerrilla army, is vanquished. It is a matter of time before his body is discovered by the Sri Lankan army.

If the troops of 58 Division do discover his body, it will perhaps be with a cyanide capsule in his mouth or a bullet wound to the temple. Or maybe loyal cadres of his Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) will burn his body before the soldiers

reach him.

The man who perfected the cult of woman suicide bombers and gave every Tamil enlistee in his army a cyanide pill to wear around his neck has only one escape route -- if New Delhi deploys helicopters and an elite force for a rescue snatch. But that will not be forthcoming.

Prabhakaran shut the door to New Delhi during the Indian election campaign in 1991 when a woman Tamil Tiger bent down to touch Rajiv Gandhi's feet, triggering the bomb in her belt that blew off the head of India's once and future prime minister.

The murder was ordered in apparent

minister in 1987, sent in Indian troops to enforce a peace accord he had brokered between Tamils and Colombo.

Having learnt its lesson with Prabhakaran, India now looks the other way as Colombo pounds the Tigers with overwhelming force and little regard for civilian casualties. The government in New Delhi is run by Congress, a party headed by Gandhi's widow, Sonia.

Two years ago, the Japanese diplomat Yasushi Akashi, appointed by Tokyo to mediate a peaceful resolution of the Sri Lankan conflict, dropped in on India's national security adviser, M. K. Narayanan.

Akashi pleaded for a more sympathetic Indian attitude but Narayanan, an ex-intelligence chief to Gandhi who had held back channel talks with Prabhakaran, brushed him aside. "Have you ever seen his eyes?" Narayanan asked Akashi. "I have."

Game over.

And so, sometime this week, the

Colombo sky will probably light up with crackers as the government celebrates victory. Television journalists of Sri Lanka's state-backed media are already displaying a certain triumphalism in their reports.

The end of civil war on the teardrop-shaped island, a conflict that killed 70,000 and held back the immense potential of this strategically perched Indian Ocean island, is a matter of celebration for all Asia.

Yet, as Sri Lanka rejoices in the elimination of the dreaded Tigers and the killer their leader turned out to be, there is a sobering thought: What happens to Tamils and their legitimate demands? Who will speak for them now?

Those who have talked to President Mahinda Rajapakse lately say he is firmly committed to putting the past aside and reconstructing the north of the island, where the Tamils live. He has also vowed to work for a sincere devolution of powers to the north. That is easier said than done.

In Colombo, the man to fear is not so much the president as his brother, Gotabhaya, the defence secretary. Known for having a short fuse, Gotabhaya Rajapakse is intolerant of criticism and has an unbending attitude on the Tamil question.

It is under his direction that the LTTE was driven to its knees. Earlier this month, Colombo formally released Norway from its role as a mediator in the ethnic conflict.

Although the trigger was the attack by expatriate Tamils on the Sri Lankan Embassy in Oslo, the Rajapakse government has never had much time for the Norwegians, believing them to be partial to the Tigers.

Still, Colombo hopefully will see the broader picture. The Tigers may have been militarily punished, but they still hold some cards. Large numbers of civilians are still in their control and it is a safe bet that the army has not been able to seize more than half of the Tigers' weaponry

and munitions.

Besides, there is a large and vocal Tamil diaspora that is incensed at what is happening in the mother country. The Tamils within the island will remain sullen.

Perhaps it is not too late for a negotiated settlement, not the unconditional surrender or elimination that Colombo wants, says Jehan Perera of Colombo's National Peace Council.

"It does not make sense to ask an organisation that has such bargaining power to surrender unconditionally," he says. "The government should also outline in public its plans for a political settlement of the Tamil grievances."

Such things, of course, call for a statesmanship that has rarely been on show in Colombo. Nor have the Tigers ever displayed a world vision that would make a peaceful settlement possible.

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Michael Jackson gets up my nose



MICHAEL Jackson's stuff was due to be auctioned today. But the pop singer cancelled the sale.

Bother. I was hoping to pick up one of his old noses.

No, I mean it. A source in the plastic

surgery business tells me that it is well known that one of Wacko Jacko's noses collapsed. It sort of went inwards and upwards, until it was hovering somewhere between his eyebrows. The word is that a German doctor used cartilage and stuff from his ears to build up the current nose he has today.

Having an ear that looks like a nose in the middle of your face must be great for party tricks. He can put his fingers in his ears and pretend he can't hear you, but can sneakily listen in with his nose. How cool is that?

Michael Jackson must be the only

human being who has changed his face more than this toy my kid has called Mr. Potato Head.

Anyway, I wanted to buy one of his old noses as a symbol of human folly. Jacko, a guy who earns US\$1 million for each show, is running out of cash. How come?

Well, he's a pop star. These guys, like film stars, the children of tycoons, and the wives of columnists, are famed for their ability to spend vast fortunes at high speed.

Hollywood actor Nicholas Cage

revealed a few days ago that he has had to sell his castle in Bavaria, Germany. "How ever, he still has one castle left, in the UK," his spokesman said. The news brought tears to my eyes. How can a man live with only one castle? Life is hard.

Who else is reported to be low on cash? Actress Lindsay Lohan, who earns about US\$6 million a year, has apparently managed to drink the lot. This is actually a pretty impressive achievement for a 22-year-old. I'm furious with my careers advisor for failing to advise me years ago to move to California and set up a mobile alcohol stall outside her house.

But if I had to give a "financial idiot award" to someone I would give it to

Elton John, who blew US\$50 million in two years, including US\$500,000 on flowers. When a judge asked him whether it was really possible to spend so much money at a florist's, Elton replied, "Yes, I like flowers."

But maybe the top financial idiot award should be reserved for rap star MC Hammer. By the early 90s, he had earned US\$49 million, Forbes estimates. In the mid-90s, it was all gone. Accountants tried to locate it.

They discovered he had bought 17 luxury cars, two helicopters, a stable of racehorses and a bowling alley. His 12-

acre estate had a stereo so large that it needed 35 kilometres of wiring, and its walls had US\$75,000 worth of mirrors. How can anyone buy so much stuff without noticing? (If anyone can answer that question, please inform Elton John.)

Meanwhile, I cannot resist ending without a dig at Mr. Jackson's unhealthy interest in the young generation.

Q: What's the difference between Michael Jackson and a supermarket bag?

A: One is white in color, made of plastic, and should be kept well away from kids. The other is a bag for your groceries.