

## A summit for concord

Our experience reveals that a dialogue at general secretary's level is unlikely to bear any fruit. A summit meeting attended by the two leaders may help to remove the irritants that induce the divide.

Z. A. KHAN

SIX months ago our nation witnessed a rare spectacle that generated some hope that politics of concord and cohesion will probably replace politics of confrontation and conceit. Yes, I am referring to the brief exchange of pleasantries between Begum Zia and Sheikh Hasina at a function in Dhaka Cantonment to celebrate the Armed Forces Day on November 22, 2008. One thought it was a thaw in the cold and estranged relationship between the two top leaders that kept them incommunicado to each other for 17 years.

Even during the 1st session of the 9th Parliament the two leaders wished each other well on the occasion of Bengali New Year despite the bitter exchange of the gift of the gab throughout the session. So people thought that maybe this would lay the foundation of continued discussion both inside and outside Louis Kahn's sprawling dream child (Jatiya Shangshad Bhaban). But alas! This seems most unlikely as no interfacing has since occurred.

One wonders whether the political

leaders in our volatile political environment are at all aware about the wonders that a summit between the opposing forces can bring to resolve differences. Indeed, most of our politically aware people do know that parleys between the parties or parleys between two parties moderated by a third party (foreign or local) have not succeeded till date as all the stake-holding participants (barring foreign participants) came with set minds and dreadful inflexibility.

Even the immediate past caretaker government tried its utmost to get the two top leaders to sit for a discussion to iron out the differences so that the election slated for November 18, 2008 could be held on schedule. But, regrettably, this could not be held, which made it imperative for the Election Commission (EC) to reschedule the date to give time to parties for pre-election preparation.

The nation heaved a sign of relief when the election was finally held on December 29, 2008, which was acclaimed by the poll observers of home and abroad as a genuinely rigging free election. AL achieved a landslide victory. It is too early to predict how the new cabinet with new faces will fare.

We are often troubled by the confrontational politics, which has hardly yielded any good result in resolving important national issues like fighting religious extremists, terrorists, student unrest, power shortage, pricing of paddy, wheat and jute, and corruption, or in designing a profile to fight the spillover of the global recession on our economy.

There is no denying the fact that Bangladeshi citizens are by and large divided along two political lines without really understanding the basis of the division. The two major political parties castigate each other as the lackeys of two of our South Asian neighbours, which may be thought to be an extreme assertion.

Any national political party that demonstrates foreign leanings of any sort will be placed in the firing line. Therefore, it will be prudent to think that my country comes first in my judgment, and I see very little possibility of any party accommodating the interest of another country.

There could be common causes like border trade, sharing of river water, fighting terrorism etc., and any joint effort to address the problems in the interests of the involved nations should be welcome. This, by any definition, cannot invite denigration of a nation as a lackey.

As there is only a thin line of difference between the two major political parties, one can see no reason as to why either party should draw battle lines or get

involved in a sabre rattling situation, which may vitiate our political and economic future.

The prevailing political situation does not hold any promise of amity and concord. Speeches by the PM and the leader of the opposition in the last session of the 9th Parliament, which ended recently, were full of scathing remarks belittling one another's achievements while in power. The political situation is gradually becoming worse. Personal vendetta is surfacing, which is also influencing decision-making.

Unless substantive efforts are made immediately to mend fences, the nation may once again become captive of someone's whims. Our experience reveals that a dialogue at general secretary's level is unlikely to bear any fruit. A summit meeting attended by the two leaders may help to remove the irritants that induce the divide.

The nation is least ready to preside over the political feuds involving the two parties because the differences are based on non-issues. At present, the nation is reeling in the aftermath of the heinous BDR carnage, and no one should drive us to another self-inflicted injurious situation to implement any agenda that barely has national importance.

The most prudent of all conceivable antidotes to resolve the issue amicably is to get the two leaders to sit face to face with the determined objective of settling the differences relating to the issues that



Estranged leaders, divided nation.



are non-issues at the national level but are potent enough to snowball into a national calamity.

I believe that we least deserve a state of uncertainty, especially now after the end of two years of non-democratic rule through an election which the nation had longed for. I implore upon all concerned to sensitise the leadership about the probable fallout of any political upheaval when the civil-military relationship issue is still haunting the nation's future.

Let our focus be on the issues that may

endanger our political future if we are gripped by the sliding world economy, which may expose us to immense suffering. Let us understand the enormity of the problems that lie ahead and start taking measures jointly so that our suffering people do not have to face an unbearable economic situation, which may ignite a political cataclysm that may endanger our democracy.

Maj. Gen. Z.A. Khan is a former Director General of Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies.

## Is Nepal going back to instability?

Clearly, a specter of instability is stalking Nepal, which witnessed violence and mayhem causing severe economic and other losses not long ago. The Nepalese felt a new horizon had dawned for them but expectations are getting belied, which is most unfortunate.

ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE developments in Nepal stemming from the resignation of Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal have not come as a surprise, even though the sequence of events may appear to be somewhat dramatic. A simmering tension was brewing between the coalition government of the Maoist prime minister, who goes by the nom-de-guerre "Prachanda," and the powerful army on a variety of issues, including the absorption of former Maoist guerrillas into the army, ever since the Maoists emerged as a force to reckon with in running the government.

Though not desirable, the resignation of the prime minister and his government may be seen as a logical corollary to a situation where most of the political parties were at loggerheads with the dominant Maoists, and the sacking of the army chief by the government was used as a weapon by Prachanda's adversaries to avenge their defeat to the former radical leftists in the last elections.

True, for the moment political parties like the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist), a constituent of the coalition government,

may feel that the latest developments have come as a shot in the arm. But all this has threatened to plunge the former Himalayan kingdom once again into a chaotic condition.

Some political parties that are seeking to form a new "national government," sidelining the Maoists, may or may not succeed in their venture, but are unlikely to provide any stable authority that will help the country achieve political and economic stability which are badly needed for a nation that suffered terribly on both counts for several years till a peace deal was signed in 2006 and a democratic government took over last year. Prachanda's government quit hardly eight months after being in office, and this will certainly be seen as a blot in the recent glorious chapter of Nepal.

Early last year, the picturesque Himalayan country saw a momentous occasion when the 140-year-old monarchy was turned into a Republic. The once dreaded Maoists, who fought against the government for abolition of the throne and establishment of a People's Republic, were at the vanguard of the change while other political parties lent their support.

However, some political parties

favoured a role for the monarchy in the line with Britain or Japan, but the radical leftists were totally opposed to any form of existence of royalty -- and they finally won. The Maoists and most people in the country attribute much of the myriad economic and political problems of the nation to the monarchy.

Earlier, King Gyanendra capitulated to the demands of the political parties when he quit executive powers by re-convening the dissolved parliament following long-drawn protests across the country. But this anti-monarch agitation was successful only after the underground Maoist guerrillas threw their entire weight behind the political parties. As the king gave in, the political leaders and Maoists agreed to elections for a constituent assembly that would draft a new constitution for the nation.

In the voting, the Maoists, vying for position for the first time in a democratic way, accomplished a stunning victory by emerging as the single largest party although falling short of absolute majority. The old Nepali Congress came second and the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) third.

After bickering for sometime, the Maoists, called Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist), formed a coalition government with the Communist Party (M-L) and some other small organisations, while the Nepali Congress became the opposition.

However, for the post of the largely ceremonial president, the Nepali Congress succeeded in getting their nominee Ram Baran Yadav elected in collusion with most



Going back to chaos?

political parties barring the Maoist, whose nominee lost. There was hardly any love lost between the Nepali Congress and the Maoists since then, and it came to a head when the president vetoed the government's decision to sack army chief Gen. R. Katakawal for disobedience.

Prachanda's government had asked the army chief to initiate measures to absorb 19,000 former cadres into the army, and to take action against some army officers. But the president disapproved the dismissal order and the Communist Party (M-L) also walked away from the government, pro-

testing the sacking of Gen. Katwal. As president Yadav was the nominee of the Nepali Congress and was supported by the Communist Party (M-L) it is no wonder that they would join hands against the Maoists at a critical time.

The army is unwilling to accept the Maoist cadres in its fold as they are seen as politically indoctrinated. Most other political parties support the army's stand. Evidently, the army chief was aware of this situation and dared to turn a blind eye to government's order. But the moot point is, can the president under the Westminster

system veto the decision of the government headed by the prime minister? The answer should obviously be a "no," whatever be the merit of the case. Prachanda calls this as an "assault" on democracy.

It is a fast developing situation in Nepal as the Maoists are taking things to the streets and have vowed to disrupt parliament and functioning of any new government that may come up without their participation. Undeniably, the Maoists, despite their lack of experience in running the government, have established themselves as a strong force with close links with the masses, who are mired in poverty.

They may not have succeeded in providing anything tangible during their eight-month rule, but their sincerity is hardly questioned. They are the main party in parliament, and if a government with the Communist Party (M-L) at the head is installed with support from the Nepali Congress and others, it may not be stable.

Clearly, a specter of instability is stalking Nepal, which witnessed violence and mayhem causing severe economic and other losses not long ago. The Nepalese felt a new horizon had dawned for them but expectations are getting belied, which is most unfortunate. Any settlement of Nepal's crisis sidelining the Maoists may be counter-productive, and political wisdom and sagacity are required to save the lovely country from another cycle of violence and instability.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior journalist and analyst of international affairs.

## What are the government's priorities?

The ruling party must realise that times have changed since the last time it held the reins of government. The party leaderships would do well to take into account the issues raised above; if they are to succeed they should proceed with extreme caution and care.

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

IT must be said that the government is to yet embark on any of the critical issues of public interest facing the nation with any degree of seriousness or urgency. So far the ruling party has been busy in petty squabbles and infighting. Besides it is also busy in further "consolidating" its power base. God alone knows why? Is there any real need for it?

The Chhatra League issue is far from resolved. If anything, colleges and universities continue to be vandalised all over the country. BCL factions are also engaged in acts of extortion besides establishing their supremacy in the residential halls at most of the public universities and colleges.

Yet, all that the government has done so far is talk of stern action against perpetrators. Warnings of stern action have come from no less a person than the PM. Madam home minister has also spoken likewise at public forums and

meetings. All this is yet to produce any tangible result, on the contrary, matters have gone from bad to worse.

The power situation has become despicable. As a matter of fact, it is at its worst ever. Already, a major disturbance has taken place only a few miles from the heart of the capital, with intermittent protest marches taking place even within the city limits. Yet, all that the government has been able to do is give people false hopes for better days and indulge in an ugly blame game.

As much as I do realise that we should not expect miracles, at the same time it is my firm belief, given the due attention it deserves, that the power situation could have been better than what it is now. Apparently, there are as many as three ministers assigned to the power and energy sector, with none other than the PM heading it.

There is yet another issue related to this sector that confuses me. It is about the role of Dr. Taufiq Elahi Chowdhury. Apparently, he has been

"verbally" asked by the prime minister to oversee matters. I wonder what sort of an arrangement that is. Can matters of governance at the national level be conducted on such verbal orders? It has further weakened the operation of the ministry, creating confusion amongst the rank and file and the related agencies. Remember the famous saying "Too many cooks spoil the broth?"

The water situation is no different either. People of the capital are suffering from acute shortage of water. Whatever little is available is highly contaminated with all sorts of deadly bacteria, causing havoc with children in particular. They are dying of cholera and other enteric diseases. It is my apprehension that we are heading for worse days in the coming months, or even years.

Coming to the question of checking the spiraling of prices of essentials, here too a dismal scenario persists despite claims of success by the concerned authorities including the prime minister herself. Indeed, we want no repetition of the poor performance of the previous regimes.

Of no less importance is the issue of investigations of the incident that took place on February 25 at the BDR headquarters. The way things are progressing I have this suspicion that it will be difficult if not impossible for the gov-

ernment to make the final outcome of the investigations credible in the eyes of the people.

It is my impression that this government is yet to make a comprehensive assessment of the prevailing socio-political environment in the country. It is certainly confused about its own priorities. Despite the fact that it has come to rule with an unprecedented mandate from the people, it has already failed to listen to the voice of the people and its interventions are reflective of autocratic overtures.

Conversely, it has become habitual with this government to mislead and misguide the people through pointless rhetoric. The entire administration is working from the premise of misplaced priorities. Even the cabinet members have no clue as to what is that they are expected to do or achieve.

They talk too much, they talk at cross-purposes, and their deliberations are often irresponsible and meaningless. Their articulation is substandard, reflective of poor taste, and often seems to be born out of anger mingled with frustration. What they have been good at, so far, is confusing the people who are already weighed down by innumerable problems that they have to deal with in their day-to-day lives.

Against this backdrop, take a look at this currently debated issue of the

government's action for evicting Khaleda Zia from her residence in the cantonment. Although the pet argument provided by the concerned spokesman of the government is that the government views the matter as a routine action, it is not only cheeky but also deceitful.

Surely there is more to it than that. It is highly provocative, totally unwarranted move. The timing of the action also raises questions. I wonder whose brainchild this is anyway?

The government's logic behind the action is not only poor but also untenable. This business of using the premises for construction of living quarters (flats) for the families of the slain army officials who lost their lives at the gruesome BDR incident may have high sentimental appeal but, looked at dispassionately, it is a poor argument.

A few years back, we had as many as 15 army personnel who died in a plane crash while serving in a UN Peace Keeping Mission in some country in Africa. My question is, why not build some quarters for their families too? I should also like to point out that BDR is the only paramilitary outfit of the country routinely engaged in mini wars for defending our borders.

At some point in the re-organising and revamping of the BDR such "benefit packages" should also be incorporated in

the revised rules. What I am trying to say is this that from here onwards we should refrain from creating class distinctions for people whose jobs are similar in content and spirit. On the other hand, considering the various issues of gigantic proportions under which the country is reeling, this matter of Khaleda's eviction is at best a non-issue.

In conclusion, I have to say that this action of the ruling party, other things being as they are, is reflective of its lack of wisdom in the art of political management at the national level. The ruling party must realise that times have changed since the last time it held the reins of government. The party leaderships would do well to take into account the issues raised above; if they are to succeed they should proceed with extreme caution and care.

It is high time that the government should seriously consider bringing about a qualitative change in its management tactics, making it more people-oriented and rising above petty jealousies and partisan considerations.

Shamsher Chowdhury is an eminent columnist.

### Corrigendum

In the article "Remove the middlemen," printed on May 7, the figure "17 million tons" was inadvertently given as "170 million tons" in the first sentence of the seventh paragraph. The error is regretted.