

Rejuvenating BNP

The excerpts of the proposal are -- ensure proper election to form all committees of the party at all tiers, replace all corrupt leaders from the party's central leadership with efficient, qualified and honest leaders through proper election and cut all relationship with Jamaat-i-Islami.

MD. ANWARUL KABIR

TO promote good governance a strong, responsible opposition is a must. This ensures the proper surveillance of the government's policy-making and operational processes, which keeps the government on the right track.

The UK and the US, which have achieved the highest level of democracy, have two equally strong parties in terms of popularity and organisational strength. The Conservative and Labour parties in the UK and Republican and Democratic parties in the USA have been working for quite a long time to enhance the spirit of democracy. The success of these two countries lies in the performances of their major political parties.

One may look at India, the largest democratic country where, apart from the Indian National Congress, no other party has achieved enough strength to be claimed as all-India party. Even the Congress, over the decades, has lost its popularity in many provinces of India. Because of this, political parties, includ-

ing Congress, participate in elections by forming alliances. This leads to formation of coalition governments and hung parliaments. Yet, Indian democracy has not faced any major setback as the regional governments are democratic and empowered enough.

In Bangladesh, since the fall of autocracy, both AL and BNP have emerged as major parties, having similar strength and popularity. However, due to massive corruption, price spiralling of essentials, patronisation of communal extremists, killing of popular leaders like A. S. M Kibria, Ahsanullah Master, grenade attack on AL's rally during the era of BNP-led coalition government, and later the attempt to arrange a staged election by manipulating Prof. Lazuddin's caretaker government, have damaged the popularity of BNP enormously.

BNP's unprecedented debacle in the last election confirmed this assertion. However, the installation of a new caretaker government in 2007 was a major blow to BNP's politics as this disrupted

BNP's plan to use state machineries in the electoral process.

1/11 politics has divided BNP into "reformists" and traditionalists. Though its counterpart, AL, had resolved this crisis under the prudent leadership of Zillur Rahman, BNP is still in complete disarray, both centrally and at the grass-root level, due to this division.

For the sake of running this new phase of democracy smoothly, we require a strong opposition. So, the initiative of BNP chief Khaleda Zia to reorganise the party with a view to regaining its lost image is appreciable.

This is the biggest challenge for Khaleda. The misrule of the BNP-Jamat government has not only eroded BNP's popularity but has also damaged her personal image. Khaleda's bold participation in the anti-autocracy movement against Ershad, and her uncompromising attitude, had turned her into a charismatic leader. Her uncompromising attitude was applauded much by the common people, and this led BNP to win in 1991.

Throughout BNP's last regime, its leadership was not more in Khaleda's hands. The young group led by Tarique Zia, based in Hawa Bhaban, virtually led the government and the party in all aspects. They had no political ideology other than to loot the public money using state influence. Unfortunately, Khaleda, once an uncompromising leader, completely surrendered to the corrupt in the party, which eroded her charismatic



Listen to the grassroots workers.

confidence of the people.

It will be difficult for Khaleda to recreate her lost image, though not impossible. First of all, as the leader of the then government, she has to take responsibility for all the misdeeds during her last regime. The people of this land are soft hearted, and if Khaleda apologises for the misdeeds perhaps they will forgive and forget the past. On the other hand, if she defends her corrupt son, she will never regain the

confidence of the people. Just reorganising the party will not work. In fact, for BNP, rejuvenation with honest and efficient leadership is essential. BNP must value the proposals of the grassroots workers. The excerpts of the proposal are -- ensure proper election to form all committees of the party at all tiers, replace all corrupt leaders from the party's central leadership with efficient, qualified and honest leaders through

proper election and cut all relationship with Jamaat-i-Islami.

Grassroot workers have also pointed at corrupt leadership for BNP's fragile state. Unfortunately, among BNP's central leaders, both from reformist and traditionalist groups, it is hard to find any honest leader who can play a major role in reviving the party. Almost all members of BNP's standing committee are too old to lead the party in this crucial time. Moreover, most of them were also involved in massive corruption. So, BNP must find honest, efficient new leaders from the party's grass-root level.

BNP's major weakness is its autocratic constitution. This constitution worked better during the regime of BNP's founder, military-turned-political leader General Ziaur Rahman. But the fact is that Zia's regime was not fully democratic, rather it was quasi-military. Zia used state machineries to organise BNP, following a top-down approach.

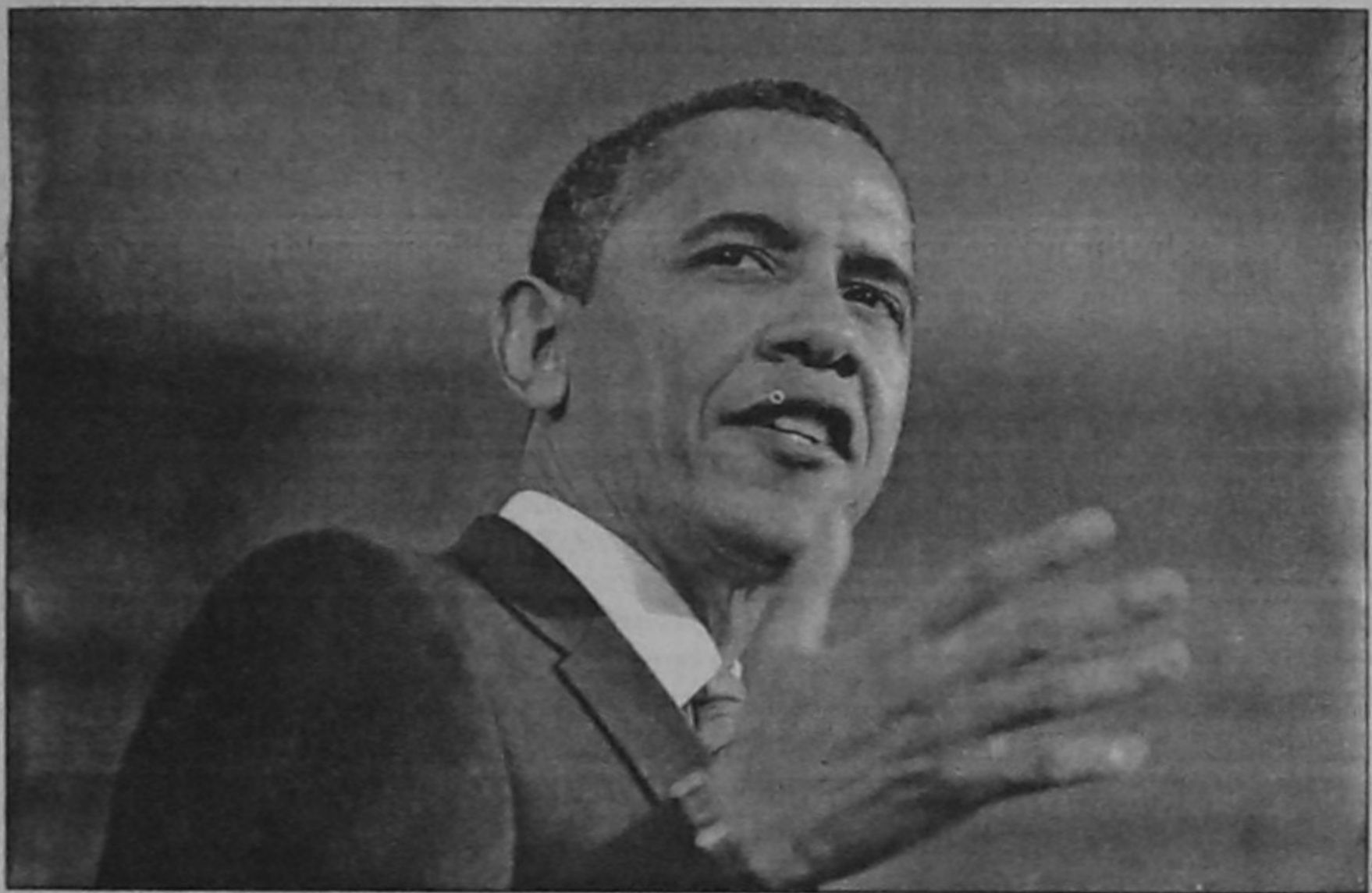
But things have changed. People are now politically more aware and they are striving for true democracy. So, on the part of BNP, it is mandatory to amend its constitution by curtailing the absolute power of the party chairperson.

Khaleda should hold a party council immediately and reorganise the party, following the opinions of its workers in a complete democratic manner. The sooner, the better.

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Obama's harsh words

This amounts to saying that henceforth Pakistan's sovereignty will be subject to the US's strategic purposes and national security interests. It is within these interests that Pakistan is to be helped and the US promises to cooperate.



M.B. NAQVI

PRESIDENT Obama's speech on completing his first 100 days in office had things that were reassuring and also things that were alarming from the viewpoint of Pakistan's government. It came shortly before the Pakistan president was to attend a trilateral conference on "Af-Pak" matters in Washington.

Obama could be said to have laid an uneven playing field for the Pakistan government.

Among the reassuring things he said was that he did not believe that Pakistan's nukes would fall into the hands of Islamic militants because the Pakistan army's control over them was effective and that the army understood what could happen if they fell into the wrong hands. Obama

praised the Pakistan army for realising the extent of the danger from Taliban, al-Qaeda and other militants better than Pakistan's civilian government.

But what was absolutely new was his disclosure that the "Pakistan army has begun lately to understand that India is not a mortal and permanent threat to Pakistan, while Islamic militants are." It suggests that the army may have begun withdrawing some troops from Pakistan's eastern borders with India to transfer them to the Durand Line as the Americans had been advising.

There is no knowing whether the army has actually started transferring troops to the Af-Pak area or is about to do so. The army cannot do such a thing without the approval of the federal government in Islamabad. But Obama's officials may have taken care of Islamabad's civilian government. Even this should be highly disturbing to the PPP-led government, that insists on calling itself a democratic government thanks to the February 2008 election.

Obama also said something devastating: "The civilian government is very fragile. It has no capacity to deliver basic services such as schools, adequate healthcare, rule of law and a judicial system that works for Pakistan's majority." He also said: "This government cannot gain the support and loyalty of its people."

Now, contrast this with the praises he has showered on the Pakistan army. Everybody knows that many of America's

top brass have been descending on Islamabad for confabulations with Pakistani generals.

The Pakistan military is supposed to have begun seeing "in the last few days" that obsession with India was mistaken: "(India) is not a mortal threat to Pakistan. To think it is a mortal threat to Pakistan is misguided. The biggest threat to Pakistan is from internal extremists and militant forces." This has been the American view for long.

The Pakistan army is taking the armed threat from militant extremists more seriously. This proves the superiority of the army over the Zardari regime. It is because of this that it is ready to provide maximum cooperation (aid) as well as help.

Then, there was a bombshell for all Pakistanis: Obama's dictum is: "the US wants to respect Pakistan's sovereignty. But -- and it is a big but -- the US has huge strategic interests, national security interests in Pakistan's stability so that we do not end up with a nuclear-armed militant state."

This amounts to saying that henceforth Pakistan's sovereignty will be subject to the US's strategic purposes and national security interests. It is within these interests that Pakistan is to be helped and the US promises to cooperate. The purpose is to prevent Pakistan from becoming a "nuclear armed militant state."

The purposes of the two countries are not mutually exclusive, of course. Indeed

there is full consonance between the purposes of the two. Therefore, there should be no trouble in Pakistan cooperating with America, but both need to think and act intelligently.

The clarity with which Obama has enunciated America's interests should be an advantage. Pakistan has to be single-minded and clear about its interests. It is not that Americans are rich, therefore their thoughts are necessarily right or Pakistanis are poor thinkers because their state has fewer resources.

Pakistanis cannot expect Americans to act against their own interests. They won't do it for the sake of Pakistan, which is also not popular in their country. Therefore, the two have to be clear-headed, and they do not have to love each other in order to cooperate on Af-Pak.

True, Americans do not want Taliban and other Islamic extremists to set up a state of the kind they did in Kabul in 1996. Indications are that they would, for reducing their losses, consider the old Musharraf proposal; doing a deal with moderate or less extreme Taliban and others.

Pakistanis need to insist that religious extremists of all kinds and of any place must not be allowed to control a modern state.

This does not show a liking for intense bloodletting. What it means is more intellectual clarity and political persuasion. This is not impossible. Pakistanis have to bring out the essence of 1500

years of experience of peaceful and peaceable Islam that enabled it to spread so fast. That can save the day in at least Pakistan.

Only a small number of Pakistanis is of the same mind as Mullah Muhammad Umar or Osama bin Laden. Most Pakistanis do not wear their Islam on their sleeves. They carry it easily. And that has lasted through the ages. No new Islam is necessary.

It is true there is a dichotomy in modern Muslim societies. There was also a revivalist trend in the past, while there are many who are impressed by the progress made by the west. Such progress needs to be achieved and preserved. But it must be remembered that number of liberals and modernists in Muslim societies is small, while most are prone to respond to extremist slogans.

Islamic extremists have borrowed a page or two from Maoists. They have used class war techniques to expand their sway. Unless the modernists can deliver something attractive to the people, they may have no future.

No amount of American forces can win the battle of ideas in a situation where one side remains dirt poor and undereducated while the modernists (Americans) talk of progress but do not make it happen. Liberals and modernists have to deliver, and this has to be experienced by the people. Talking about these things will not succeed and is not an option.

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Infidelity thy name is Congress

The ruling Congress has been the biggest sinner. It has stopped at nothing to try to be victorious. It has had no compunction in using criminals, communalists and casteists for garnering votes. Money and liquor was no taboo for them like other political parties.

KULDIP NAYAR

POLITICAL parties in India have proved beyond doubt in this Lok Sabha election that their primary objective has been to attain power. They have adopted the most unbecoming methods to try to increase their number without any sense of guilt. They pushed out issues and replaced them with personal attacks and whatever else suited. The polity has remained fragmented as the idea of India has become more distant.

The ruling Congress has been the biggest sinner. It has stopped at nothing to try to be victorious. It has had no compunction in using criminals, communalists and casteists for garnering votes. Money and liquor was no taboo for them like other political parties. Some 12% of the Congress candidates are charge-sheeters and many crorepatris (millionaires). The assets the party nominees have declared average Rs 1 crore (Rs 10 million) per candidate.

The Congress has seen to it that Octavio Quetterechi, an Italian and known to be close to Congress president Sonia Gandhi, is off the list of those who received payoffs for buying Bofors guns

from Sweden. The CBI, a department under the Prime Minister's office, has withdrawn the "wanted" notice from Interpol. This move has besmeared the face of the Congress still more.

The party's claim to be secular does not wash because it has not implemented even one recommendation of the government-appointed Sachar Committee report which pointed out last year that the plight of Muslims was worse than that of dalits, untouchables. The BJP's attack that the Congress uses Muslims as the vote bank, without doing anything concrete for them, is justified. Indeed, the party brings secularism to the fore only during the polls and forgets it after coming to power.

Backwardness of Muslims is a sad commentary on the Congress, which has been in power at the centre and in most states for more than 50 years since independence. Yet the Muslims do not seem to have many options. They cannot vote for the BJP, which is out and out Hindu. Nor do they have much confidence in regional parties, which are getting too parochial and too imbedded in caste and local problems.

However, the community may still vote

for two or three main regional parties, which are said to be emerging as the kingmaker. With the Congress and the BJP, teetering at somewhere about 150 seats each, the regional parties become important because they would provide some 75 members to enable any party or a combination to reach the magic figure of 272 in the house of 543.

If the two fail to cross the 300 mark together, the regional parties may bid for power. That means roping in either the Congress or the BJP. Where will UP chief minister Mayawati fit in this scheme of things is difficult to say.

Muslims constitute 15% of some 700 million voters and can make a difference at least in 200 seats. But its earlier tendency to vote for a winnable candidate against the BJP has got dissipated. There are several secular parties claiming the community's vote. Mulayam Singh's Samajwadi Party in UP and Lalu Prasad's Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar has been getting most of Muslim vote. But both have expressed their unhappiness over the community becoming lukewarm towards them.

Muslims look like moving towards the Congress, which was their first choice till 15 years ago. Sensing this, the party has gone it alone in UP and Bihar even though it has destroyed the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), which gave it a majority. The party has jettisoned Mulayam Singh who helped the Manmohan Singh government survive the vote of confidence some six months ago.

Similarly, Lalu Prasad who has stood by the Congress has been told that he may

not be included in the cabinet if the Congress comes back. One thing the party has proved: Infidelity thy name is Congress.

Again, it is the Congress, which made it difficult for the communists to continue in the UPA. The nuclear treaty with the US was crucial for both -- for one, it meant nearly the membership of the nuclear club and, for the other, it indicated New Delhi's strategic alliance with Washington. The communists have founded the third front. But it is tragic that their present strength of 62 may go down to 45 when they need the numbers most.

The communists have shown their anger against the Congress by declaring that they would not mind the BJP coming to power even if their support could help the Congress form the government. It is difficult to imagine such a situation because the communists' biggest enemy is the BJP.

Angry Prakash Karat, secretary-general of the Marxist Communists, may come to realise that letting the BJP to cobble a ruling combination will turn out to be yet another "historical blunder."

In comparison, the BJP has nurtured its allies well. Except Orissa's Biju Janta Dal, which left the BJP's National Democratic Alliance (NDA) on its own, the rest of constituents have stayed with it. Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar is a difficult customer. He can join hands with the Congress if it means tasting power at the centre. The NDA has added one more ally, the Asom Gana Parishad, which is not large, but it shows how keen the BJP is to have the maximum outside support since



Is Congress betraying Muslim voters?

every member will count in what looks like the closest contest since independence.

The BJP is conscious that L.K. Advani, 80 years old does not appeal to the youth since as many as 23 million are such voters. Rahul Gandhi, 38, sells better. But his stock has not yet risen so high that he can be chosen prime minister despite the efforts of his mother, Congress president Sonia. His press conference can spell out the party's strategy but not bring votes. If the Congress wins Manmohan Singh would be the Prime Minister and could withdraw in favour of Rahul Gandhi later.

Yet the main challenge, which Indian political parties will face after elections is how to accommodate the nation's diversities in the political structure.

Problems have been left unsolved for years. The National Integration Council cannot bring about the emotional unity. The issue continues to be how to string together the local and regional forces for the central idea of India.

A federal structure can only tie up loose threads. New Delhi has to decentralise power. Troubles in Pakistan began to increase when the authority came to be concentrated at Islamabad. The breakaway of Bangladesh was the natural fallout. New Delhi cannot stay smug or suppress aspirations that different regions represent. It has to make them feel that their entity means a lot.

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