

Governments re-empowered

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COPENHAGEN, 1995. We were there to attend the world summit on social development. Almost all the member countries of the UN were represented by their head of state or head of government. A phalanx of NGOs from all over the world descended on the premises to make their points through whispering, lobbying, poster, pamphleting, and raising their voices.

A slew of seminars and conferences were arranged for NGO delegations. Leaders of the NGOs were pretty resourceful. They held lunch and dinners for the targeted participants and organizers. We were also invited to a lunch hosted

by an NGO leader from Bangladesh. The host was well known to me; he was always very warm and friendly. He was, however, an ardent believer in NGO superiority. According to him, the government's job was to create problems for the people and NGO's job was to resolve these problems. As if NGOs are all good and governments are all bad.

He said that the main conference represented the governments and the conferences outside the main canopy (NGO conferences) represented the people. Bangladesh had a democratically elected government at that time. I wanted to know what else but an elected government could represent a country. When he indicated that NGOs were better poised to

articulate the voices of the people my riposte was that they had no mandate from the people.

NGOs are donor controlled, with a penchant for autocratic decision-making. With no accountability in their organisations, they could in no way represent any group of people in the country, let alone the entire population. It will be a great mistake if they try to encroach into the jurisdiction of government or endeavour to supplant government institutions.

A vigorous campaign all over the world was carried out in mid and late '90s to undermine the position of governments vis-a-vis the private sector. Over-enthusiastic proponents of market and non-government organisations questioned the very rationale of a government's existence. They argued that a government could justifiably operate if it fulfilled the market criteria of operation. That meant if the services provided by the government were worth the tax paid by the citizens only then could a government be trusted with those services.

In their perception, government was reduced to a business enterprise devoid

of its political and administrative role. They would be happy to marginalise the role of government as far as possible. They contended that because of complex political dynamics governments were doomed to be partisan, corrupt and inefficient. Only pressure from the private sector, particularly NGOs, might put the government on the correct track.

The financial meltdown has exploded the myth of private sector efficiency and fair transactions. It has again perched the government on the exalted role which it stood to lose a few years back. Greed is also a basic human instinct and, left unreined by government regulations, it may spell disaster for the citizens. This happened in the US, and the storm sent the world financial system haywire. As a last resort, the government had to step in with stimulus packages. It had to use its prerogative -- the monopoly power in the fiscal and monetary area.

It is now evident that a government is not merely a bunch of people indulging in bountiful perks and issuing flats at their sweet will. It is a huge machine with non-parliamentary power -- coercive and non-coercive -- that pervades throughout the country.

In fact, a government is still the biggest, most powerful and the most resourceful organisation in most countries. It is vested with legal authority, administrative fiat and eminent domain to overcome problems that agencies in the private sector will hardly dare to address.

An elected government can also mobilise people to address the problems confronted by the nation. It can design rescue plans with people's money, if they so endorse. Government can collect voluntary contributions, it can borrow from citizens, it can impose fees or charges and, in extreme exigency, it can print money to defray the cost of the plan. The options open to a government are not available to the private sector or NGOs. Leaders of the private sector find themselves inadequate when tackling the convoluted problems created by reckless behaviour of their colleagues.

The upshot of the discussion is that a government, as an entity, should not be compared with any other institution, be it the free market or a quango. The latter institutions are meant for limited purposes and their remit is completely different.

ent from that of a government. The private sector should enlist the government's support so that they can carry out their tasks efficiently. Government may create an environment that generates synergy and creates confidence and trust among citizens so that they support its plans designed to address national problems.

It has always been very difficult to reconcile the interest of individuals with that of the community. An individual has to sell a part of his/her freedom to buy additional freedom. It is a painstaking job to formulate the trade-off equation. In a broad-brush analysis, government represents the larger community. The general perception, rightly or wrongly, is that government suppresses individual freedom for the sake of vested groups billed as the community as a whole. A government that can strike an acceptable equilibrium will perform much better in mobilising men and material in order to design a rescue plan to tide over any national problem.

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Israel's greed for land

This inexorable settlement expansion is the major thorny issue blocking the negotiations for the implementation of the roadmap to the two-state solution (TSS) -- a viable Palestinian state and a secured Israel, with Jerusalem as the capital for both states.

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A Palestinian State is wishful thinking as long as Israel's greed for land-grabbing and illegal settlements continues. Only a serious lack of sense of moral imperative drives Israel to justify illegal occupation on security and Biblical claims.

Figures provided by "Peace Now" show that 80 of the 100 outposts in the West Bank were built wholly or partly on private Palestinian land. Sixteen outposts are located entirely on private land, and more than half of the other outposts are on private land. Seven thousand of the 16,000 dunams occupied by the 100 outposts are privately owned. Jewish settlers in the West Bank grew from about 211,000 to almost 290,000 while settlers in East Jerusalem have grown to more than 190,000.

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Every American president after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war opposed Israeli "settlements" in occupied land. But the opposition has almost always come with

wink-and-nod approval of continued settlement activity.

To break the status-quo -- and unlike his predecessor -- President Obama is demanding of Israel that it lives up to the requirement of the 2003 roadmap toward a TSS and freeze all construction in all the settlements. However, in a July 17 Washington Post article, former PM Ehud Olmert resented the US demand for freezing of all settlements.

In a June speech for the first time, Israel's PM Benjamin Netanyahu grudgingly accepted the possibility of a Palestinian state in parts of the West Bank and Gaza -- one that was hailed by some as a milestone while others dubbed it wishful thinking.

Wishful it is, since another PM, Ariel Sharon, had also embraced the roadmap but only after the disarming of Hamas, eliminating any residual resistance in Fatah, and then building civic institutions for the Palestinians.

Sharon placed as many roadblocks as he could conceive, because he never truly subscribed to the roadmap. With Netanyahu, only the player has changed -- it's déjà vu. His father, Ben-Zion Netanyahu -- a 100-year-old historian and a stalwart of Zionism -- reinforced it by quoting his son on an Israel TV interview in early July.



Proof of Tel Aviv's lust to expand.

When asked about the genuineness of his son's acceptance of the creation of a Palestinian state, Ben-Zion said: "He doesn't support it. He supports such conditions that they [the Palestinians] will never accept it. That's what I heard from him. I didn't propose these conditions, he did. They will never accept these conditions. Not one of them." That is gratingly insincere -- to say the least.

Israel has spurned the complete freeze on settlements outright; instead agreed to a temporary freeze provided construction

in occupied East Jerusalem and the 2,500 housing units underway in the West Bank continues unimpeded. That's not all; a "temporary and limited" settlement freeze is also conditional on Arab countries conceding new concessions to Israel.

The US is now working with Arab governments to secure civilian over-flights for Israel and the opening of Israeli interest sections in these countries as an inducement for implementing the "temporary and limited" settlement freeze.

This is so laughable -- rewarding Israel for stopping land grabbing and building illegitimate settlements on Palestinian lands.

A complete settlement freeze offers the prospect of facilitating conditions for the two states negotiations. But Olmert insists that such a freeze will only harden the Palestinian's and Arab countries' positions at the negotiating table on many outstanding disputed issues.

Olmert possibly thinks that continuation of expanding settlements would work as a stick for engaging the Arab governments and the Palestinians in endless dialogues with the false promise of giving carrots -- as in the past -- while letting illegitimate expansion continue.

Tough negotiations on the settlement freeze issue between Israel and the US continue. This is an Israeli ploy to divert the focus from the ultimate TSS and fits Netanyahu's game plan. Hopefully, the Obama administration sees this Israeli design and acts decisively and fast before time runs out.

Israel can be persuaded by the US to accept most of what the US wants to do. Olmert admits that the US [the tax payers] extends crucial security and economic aid and important political backing to Israel in the international arena (example: Security Council vetoes in favour of Israel's of wrongdoings). But the US politicians are afraid to displease Israel by pushing hard because of the overpowering Jewish lobby and the Jewish voting blocks in the US.

Besides, what would the US gain by establishing a state for the impoverished Palestinians except some scores on moral callings? All the Arab governments are already American lackeys and some are already friends with Israel.

Olmert claims that Israel's partnership with the US is one of its greatest strategic assets. I wonder what Israel offers to the US in return except being always ready to bomb a Muslim country if it builds nuclear power plants for generating electricity. It's now threatening to destroy Iran's nuclear installations -- something that will happen once the US gives the green light with the tacit backing of the Arab governments.

Isn't Israel's security greatly enhanced with the removal of Saddam Hussein from Iraq? Over 3,000 Americans soldiers and over 100,000 Iraqis have so far lost their lives, and tens of thousands American soldiers and Iraqis have been wounded and maimed.

Instead of being a little gracious to America's wishes for freezing illegal settlements, Israel displayed egotism. Olmert argues against including settlement expansions in the public agenda and instead favours a dialogue, as in the past. He insists on strengthening US-Israel bilateral relations to deal with Iran's nuclear threat, and normalising relations between Israel and the Arab states. He cautioned -- probably referring to Iran -- that the time for dealing with such important matters is running out.

There is an antidote to Israel's intransigence to the implementation of the roadmap to the two state solution -- the US privately threatening a moratorium on all economic and military aid to Israel and telling Israel that Iran is a sovereign state that is free to develop its peaceful nuclear program unverified. I believe that will do it -- however wishful the thinking may be.

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A will without a way

On his part, Dr. Singh is committed to finding peace with Pakistan during his second term. He also knows that if he cannot find it soon, it will elude him later. That is yet another paradox.

M.J. AKBAR

PRIME Minister Manmohan Singh is juggling with a hydra-headed question that is both philosophical and practical. Worse, it is also immediate. How much benefit should one give to doubt?

Doubt is theoretically equidistant from right and wrong, but in real life, there is evidence, evidence creates weightage, and the weight of evidence demands judgement. Doubt is the classic weapon of both spies and diplomats. They might as effectively sow it with violence, or plant it with a smile. Doubt is the only fully certain component of the Indo-Pak equation. Call this the first of many a paradox.

On his part, Dr. Singh is committed to finding peace with Pakistan during his second term. He also knows that if he cannot find it soon, it will elude him later. That is yet another paradox. He was ready with a formula for such an excruciating dilemma in his speech in the Lok Sabha on July 29, bravely defending the joint statement with Pakistan's Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani. He recalled Ronald Reagan's useful corrective: trust, but verify.

An American president, alas for the rest of us, has options that others cannot claim. Reagan would not trust Muammar Gaddafi with a toy duck in a bathtub.

When American intelligence satisfied the president with verification of Libya's role in a terrorist incident, Reagan ordered up the air force, roused the ever-willing Margaret Thatcher, and bombed the capital of Libya back to the sand dunes.

Gaddafi, living in a tent (a practice he has not given up), escaped, but lost a daughter in that aerial bombardment. Reagan's trust-verify relationship had a third dimension: act. This is not readily available to Dr. Singh.

A more relevant analogy may be Reagan's arms talks with Leonid Brezhnev, where trust could be fused with verification. But here, too, we enter unique territory defined by a unique moment in history. The objective situation had changed. US and USSR were no longer military equals. The Soviets might have had the nuclear capability to destroy the world, but nuclear arms are a deterrent, not a means of offense. The Vietnam syndrome had already been overtaken by the Afghanistan syndrome. One empire was cranking up. The other empire was winding down.

There are few practical means of verifying good or bad intentions on our jinxed subcontinent. There are so many wheels within wheels in the terror juggernaut -- we saw only the front end in Mumbai last November. Dr. Singh might be generous enough to give Islamabad benefit of the

doubt on the evidence of a dossier presented to him two days before he left for Egypt, but this dossier does not explain the non-arguments by the government lawyer in the Lahore High Court that permitted Hafiz Saeed, leader of the Jamaat ud Dawah (the new name, a thin camouflage, which the Lashkar e Tayaba has acquired upon being placed on the list of terrorist organisations by the United Nations).

The Lahore High Court released Saeed because, while the official accusation linked him to Al Qaeda, "the security laws and anti-terrorism laws of Pakistan are silent on Al Qaeda being a terrorist organisation." The dossier does list the few who have been arrested, but hundreds and thousands remain at liberty to plan and implement the next Mumbai. The India-baiters in Islamabad now have a tool as well -- the Balochistan clause in the joint statement.

The Jamaat ud Dawah tells any visiting journalist that there has been no change in its objective; to "liberate" the Kashmir valley from "Hindu rule." They have not promised any concessions to a Sikh prime minister. To what extent is this still the policy of the Pakistan government and its key military-intelligence wings? A clear and written answer to this question is the only thing that will eliminate doubts.

Are we likely to get an answer from Islamabad? First, we must ask the question.

Are there any options in-between? There is one option, which no one seems to have investigated, possibly because it sounds too boring. But it can re-energise the impetus towards a visit by Dr. Singh to Pakistan next year and a possible agreement. There are two dis-



The confrontation must end. But how?

tinct advantages to this option. It is relatively painless. And it can be done under a sort of cover since Islamabad might be reluctant to move into the limelight, carrying a perceived concession behind its back. Since the Indian reaction to the

problems under the guise of multilateral negotiations. This does not mean that Kashmir can be sorted out through a multilateral mechanism. There will be only two nations at the table when Kashmir is discussed. Nor is this an invitation to America to join the discussion party; the multilateral forum available to both is Saarc.

Pakistan has been holding up implementation of the South Asia Free Trade Agreement (Safta) on one pretext or the other. Dr. Singh's first verification of trust could be Pakistani concurrence to Safta at the next Saarc summit, which he should hasten. In fact, he could even make it a priority, or even a precondition.

Trade is a vital ingredient of peace-construction, because it creates masons on either side who are propelled into partnership by the common need for profit. Profit is a solid vested interest in conflict-resolution.

Saarc could also be a convenient medium for taking a few quantum leaps on terrorism protocol. When Pervez Musharraf suggested that India and Pakistan should think out of the box he meant jumping out of the Kashmir box. Saarc creates an entirely new box completely. Gilani can take cover from any local flak by explaining that the pressure of Saarc nations made it impossible for him to leave Pakistan in isolation. The public opinion created by Saarc decisions will reinforce the momentum that has been injected into the peace process by Dr. Singh.

Dr. Singh has made it clear to Parliament that he has the will. But without a way, his will will flounder.

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