

## Besides the tenure of office

Lack of mutual trust and prevalence of hostile political attitude have resulted in weak political institutions and weak national capacity to resolve national issues. The process needs to be reversed, as the tenure of political office may not be a significant factor in assessing the quality of our democracy.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE not-very-unusual observation of the LGRD minister and general secretary of Awami League about the desirability of the tenure of a parliamentary government being reduced four years instead of the current five years has not generated much heat.

Observers of our political scene, however, hold the view that while the first year of political power is one of less tension, the subsequent years become acrimonious and violent. As time passes, the parliament loses liveliness due to non-participation of the major opposition party. The reality, according to many discerning citizens, is that during the last half of the tenure of office the opposition becomes desperate while the government turns insensitive and indiscreet.

On account of such extreme combative postures, the political scene witnesses violence and confrontation wherein the key players are the criminals. Coming to specifics, one needs the criminals to instigate and commit violence and to confront the other side's set of thugs and bully-boys. The last quarter of 2006, leading to the much lamented and maligned 1/11, witnessed a nearly similar scenario.

The question whether a lessened tenure of political power will be reward-

ing or not cannot be readily answered. What, however, is necessary to rein in the arrogance of political power is the endeavour to move away from the ignominious manifestations of our admittedly intolerant political culture and, may one say, our "illiberal democracy."

It is unfortunate that democracy has not brought constitutional liberalism. This is not unusual as, to date, few illiberal democracies have matured into liberal democracies.

We have to remember that the election system, vitiated by the money and politics nexus and a literally non-performing parliament, are factors sufficient to make politics volatile and unstable -- with serious long-range ramifications. Criminalised and vandalised politics is another indicator with alarming fall-out. Violence and politics have become almost synonymous. The emergence of political bully-boys would not have been possible without patronisation by political parties. Violence has had serious negative impact on the political culture of the country.

It needs to be noted that our intolerant political conduct is reflective of an immature political culture, and politics is viewed as a game in which winner takes all in a zero-sum format. Political parties contest elections as if they are fighting

wars. Political division and rivalry often degenerate into personal enmity, thus infusing an unhealthy element of acrimony that leads to violence.

Often, the party in power is intolerant and arrogant. The opposition mostly opposes the government for the sake of opposition and is in politics as if it has an undertaking to bring down the government. Such a scenario has been described as "crisis of governance." A country with such a crisis in governance will be ill-equipped to face the challenges of management, including those emanating from the security environment.

We have to also remember that the ulterior use of religion for political ends and a constitutional provision for making Islam the state religion appear to anathema for a country that started its journey as a secular polity. Bangladeshis were no less devout Muslims in 1972 than they have been post-1988 under Islam as a state religion.

Under cover of religion, in our fledgling polity, marked by poverty and political instability, the country seems to have become a base for extremist denominational politics. There is no denying that despite insignificant representation in the national legislature, religion-based politics has spread its socio-political base deep and wide across the country. The onslaught of bigotry has already devastated us and we can all see its retrograde effects when religion and state get mixed up.

Lack of internal democracy has retarded the growth of political parties. The weakness of internal party democracy is a serious constraint to the consolidation of a democratic culture and building of national consensus. The survival of

absolutism in our "illiberal democracy" has led to the reappearance of the dictatorial culture of a coterie.

We have to admit that our ethno-linguistic and religious homogeneity factor has not succeeded in bringing the dynamics of socio-political relations within a manageable limit. Presently, our society is characterised by a significant elite-mass gap. A small segment of society influences decision-making, and allocation and distribution of resources.

The premature death of democratic experimentation in the initial years of independence led to a succession of military and quasi-military rule by a coalition of the higher echelons of the military and civil bureaucracy. Political leaders joined later to complete the "coalition of convenience." The first two groups remained dominant.

The elections of 1991, 1996 and 2001 may have restored the supremacy of political leadership but, in the meantime, immense damage has been caused to our political culture by the combined onslaught of corruption, criminalisation and commercialisation of politics of the country.

The penetration of business interests into politics, made possible through a policy of distribution of political patronage and bureaucratic support, continued on a wider scale, and the emerging business class not only attempted to control politics through donation to party coffers but also displayed a greater readiness to join politics themselves. We now have politicians and parliamentarians who have business interests. This commercialisation of politics has become the safest and convenient vehicle of achievements.

Our tendency of carving out a niche for



Will a shorter term stop this?

self or group in politics and business leads to fierce competition, which possibly has linked politics to underworld violence. Our politicians preach the Westminster model of democracy but they have combined colonial agitational politics with the role of the opposition. This is the mindset of both position and opposition.

One cries for maintenance of law and order and protection of national interest while the other fights for the democratic rights of the people through relentless agitation, work stoppages and violence. Therefore, the policies, postures, statements and actions of the political parties and ruling regimes have a significant role

in conflict aggravation and its transition from one phase to another.

Bangladesh polity is yet to forge national cohesion on fundamental values. Inadequate nation building and state building processes is the cause. Lack of mutual trust and prevalence of hostile political attitude have resulted in weak political institutions and weak national capacity to resolve national issues. The process needs to be reversed, as the tenure of political office may not be a significant factor in assessing the quality of our democracy.

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## Fatah Congress: Search for identity

It is now for Fatah and Hamas to set aside their differences and put up a unified platform to revitalise their struggle for a homeland. A reinvigorated Fatah should now reassert its nationalist identity.

MAHMOOD HASAN

THE issue of Palestine seems to have faded away from our vision. Many of us have probably not given importance to the holding of the largest Fatah Congress, for the first time on Palestinian soil. After a delay of two decades, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), president of the Fatah Movement and president of Palestinian National Authority (PNA), held the sixth Congress of Fatah from August 4-11 in Bethlehem. Originally it was scheduled from August 4-6, but was extended to complete the elections. The fifth Congress was held in Tunis in 1989, under the legendary Yasser Arafat (Abu Ammar).

More than 2000 delegates from within the occupied areas and abroad gathered in Bethlehem for the long-awaited conference. The Congress was held at a time when one sees only dark clouds over the Palestinian liberation struggle. Fatah is deeply split due to political infighting; the peace process is in doldrums; the restive younger generation that has grown up under Israeli occupation totally distrusts its ageing leaders; Israeli expansion continues; the miseries of the Palestinians

continue to increase; and the rival militant group Hamas is on the rise.

Fatah, a major center-left political movement, was established in 1954 by Yasser Arafat and three others of the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS) based in Cairo and Beirut at that time.

Originally, Fatah's main aim was to look after the welfare of the Palestinian refugees. But it slowly grew into a movement for the national rights of the Palestinian people. Soon it became the real embodiment of Palestinian aspirations for an independent state and the dominant party within the PLO.

Yasser Arafat, popular as he was, had the ability to accommodate leaders of all shades and beliefs under the umbrella of the PLO. He remained the undisputed president of Fatah, PLO and the PNA, as long as he lived. Arafat was the soul and spirit of the Palestinian struggle. Since his death, the peace process has stalled completely. Fatah's role was undermined when the PNA was set up in accordance with the Oslo Accords (1993).

The Congress had basically two important functions to perform -- to elect the Central Committee and the



Praying for unity.

Revolutionary Council, and to draw up the new political manifesto.

The newly elected 22-member Central Committee has 14 new faces, and the 120-member Revolutionary Council is also dominated by the younger members. Marwan Barghouti (50), the fiery leader who ignited the second "Intifada" (2000 uprising) and is currently in Israeli jail, has been elected to the Central Committee. Barghouti is seen as the future president of Fatah. Mohammad Dahlan (47), the head of the security services, is also in the new Committee. So is Nasser Al Kidwa, nephew of Yasser

Arafat. Former aides of Arafat -- Jibril Rajoub (56), Saeb Erakat and Nabil Shaath, also got into the Committee. Mahmoud Abbas (74) has been re-elected as president.

The results of the elections were delayed as Hamas did not allow 400 delegates from Gaza to attend -- they voted over telephone. The election results indicate that those who never left Palestine and had suffered Israeli persecution were preferred over the hardliners, who lived abroad.

In its declaration, the Congress rejected the idea of a "provisional state of

Palestine" and Israel's demand that it be recognised as a Jewish State. It committed to all Palestinian rights, including the "right of the refugees" to return to Palestine. The Congress also decided to continue negotiations without any pre-conditions and is opposed to any compromise on Palestinian rights. It declared that any agreement with Israel would be put to a referendum.

What is significant is that it committed to all forms of "resistance, including armed struggle." It however, clarified that "resistance" did not mean "terrorism." The Congress also blamed Israel for the death of Yasser Arafat, and has set up an inquiry committee to determine the cause and send the findings to the International Criminal Court.

Through this Congress, Palestinians have demonstrated that their political culture is more democratic than that of the neighbouring Arab states. The main aim of the conference was to achieve unity within the party. The fact that such a large parliament could be held under severely adverse conditions was in itself a victory. Mahmoud Abbas has emerged stronger, and his democratic credentials bolstered.

President Barack Obama, who clearly endorsed the two-state solution in his speech in Cairo last June, will now have a properly mandated Palestinian leader. Abbas should now be able to deal confidently with George Mitchell, Special

Envoy of President Obama and the hard-line Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The regional dynamics is likely to undergo some shifts after the reconstitution of the Central Committee and the Revolutionary Council. Hamas gets its support from Iran and Syria, and the Hezbollah from Lebanon, while Fatah has patronage from the West as well as from Egypt and Jordan. It would be interesting to see how the states supporting the two main rivals react when the next round of negotiations with Israel starts later this year.

The struggle of the Palestinian people is all about land. Nearly 78% of the original Palestine today constitutes Israel. What the Palestinians want now is that Israel end its occupation of the remaining 22% and recognise it as the Palestinian state. Even that could not be achieved after six decades of wars, resistance, struggle and negotiations.

Israel had always wanted to see a divided Fatah and a disunited PLO. The rise of Hamas was a welcome development for Israel insofar as it weakens the movement for the Palestinian state. It is now for Fatah and Hamas to set aside their differences and put up a unified platform to revitalise their struggle for a homeland. A reinvigorated Fatah should now reassert its nationalist identity.

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## Protection rackets

You can't convince the people you can protect them from the insurgents, after all, if you look like you're not sure you can protect yourself. They just ask why you're there in the first place. And that question is increasingly hard to answer.

CHRISTOPHER DICKEY

LONG ago, I learned from a Guatemalan general that a war against guerrillas is essentially a protection racket. Civilians are helpless and indecisive, caught between the government forces and the insurgents, and thus unreliable. They might help you in the morning, then help your enemy in the evening. So the message the government sends is clear and cruel: we can protect you from the guerrillas, but the guerrillas cannot protect you from us.

American generals talking about Afghanistan today, emphasise on the protection part of that message, ignoring the punishment. Essentially they say, "We can protect you civilians from the Taliban, but the Taliban don't have to protect you from us because we are nice guys who are going to help you build your country, and in fact we're worried about protecting you from us, too, because there's so much 'collateral damage' these days."

The whole effect is almost as confusing for the troops as it is for Afghan civilians.

Thus US Gen. Stanley McChrystal went so far as to tell his troops at Camp Leatherneck in Afghanistan on June 25 that they have to make a "cultural shift." This war isn't about killing the enemy and accepting collateral damage as inevitable. "When you do anything that harms the people you just have a huge chance of alienating the population," he said.

A few days after McChrystal's remarks, Marines trapped Taliban fighters in a residential compound, then allowed them to send out the women and children -- only to discover the fighters had slipped on burqas and walked out as well.

Retired US general Dan McNeill, a former Nato commander in Afghanistan, told the BBC this week that the main difference between the way the Russians fought their failed Afghan war in the 1980s and the way we Americans are fighting ours is that if we had a tank column wiped out by mujahedin, we would never exact

revenge by levelling the village full of civilians that the insurgents fired from.

But McNeill wanted everyone to know that there is a difference between killing regular civilians and killing civilians forced by the Taliban to become combatants. In McNeill's view, the civilians can choose.

One of the rare examples we do have of tribesmen taking up arms against the Taliban was reported out of Nangarhar province last week by *The Wall Street Journal*. The Shinwari clan was promised government development money. They were promised protection by the government. And they were promised something else: "The government 'told us that if we don't stop harbouring the Taliban, the Americans will bomb us,' said Ismat Shinwari, an elder who attended a meeting of tribal elders and provincial officials two months ago."

Sounds like the same old protection racket.

Is there really something that makes this counterinsurgency campaign different than other "savagery wars of peace," as Kipling called them? It's a myth that guerrillas win every war, but it's a fact that when they've been crushed, in almost all cases the counterinsurgent forces have employed the same cruel lessons.

The British tactics in the Second Boer War included the creation of the first

"concentration camps." The American pacification of the Philippines in the early 20th century, the brutality of the British in Malaya during 1950s, the Guatemalans in the 1980s, -- these were all what might be called war-criminal enterprises.

You say, what about the Iraqi paradigm? There, the surge in troop levels to secure the cities combined with the new-found willingness of the Americans to cut deals with former nationalist insurgents and put them on the payroll. Convincing them that American forces really would leave helped, since the presence of US troops was widely and fiercely resented.

But Afghanistan is a bigger and more primitive by far. It is just as resentful of foreign forces, whatever their motives. And the Obama administration is starting to give the impression it will never pull out. While most Iraqis wanted to return to the comforts of modern civilisation, most Afghans have never experienced them. This looks like a classic guerrilla war: a struggle by peasants against occupiers.

In hopes of finding some thread to follow out of the Afghan labyrinth, I called a former guerrilla commander from El Salvador, Joaquin Villalobos. As a young man in the 1980s, his sure sense of when to kill and when to be kind made him one of the most formidable Central American insurgent leaders in what was then a very crowded field. Now, he serves as an

adviser to the government of President Álvaro Uribe in the fight against Colombia's narcoguerrillas.

Afghanistan is super complicado. In the old days, your problem was to defeat the enemy, and it didn't matter which way you did it," the veteran guerrilla told me. "We had rural societies that were cut off from each other; you could eliminate your enemies without people seeing, creating a long peace that way. But now the idea of human rights has become more universal, a direct relationship between human rights and military effectiveness." Is McChrystal reading Villalobos? They seem to be very much on the same page.

As Villalobos sees it, the power to intimidate is much more limited than it used to be, and the risk of too much intimidation is that you will scare civilians right into the arms of your enemies. "Too much discussion about human rights has become about ethics," said Villalobos, "and it's not only an ethical problem, it's an operational problem. The army of the future needs officers that are sociologists and soldiers that are social workers."

"It's not just a matter of handing out chocolates. You have to be able to distinguish between the armed enemy and the unarmed enemy, the population that supports the enemy and the population that doesn't support the enemy," said

Villalobos. "The soldiers who don't know how to distinguish friend from enemy wind up multiplying the enemy."

So far so good for General McChrystal's strategy. But then we got down to specifics. "You have to learn to discriminate if you're going to win," said Villalobos. "And in Afghanistan, that's the problem. You don't know how to do that. You don't speak the languages. And then you have two other problems. First, you are the invader. And second, you add to this the problem with your own record of human-rights violations." Villalobos mentioned the Iraq horror picture show at Abu Ghraib in 2004 and the long history of abuses at the Bagram military base.

To achieve anything in that sort of environment, soldiers have to be willing and able to move around among the public. But the "force protection" and procedures makes that awkward if not impossible. You can't convince the people you can protect them from the insurgents, after all, if you look like you're not sure you can protect yourself. They just ask why you're there in the first place. And that question is increasingly hard to answer.

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