

Assertion of our sovereignty

We owe this trial to our martyrs as well as to our future generation. It is, indeed, a great challenge as well as an opportunity for the government to validate the sovereignty of the Republic by neutralising the pressure, and to establish that it is the people of Bangladesh themselves who hold the ultimate authority in deciding the course of their own destiny.

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

SOVEREIGNTY is a very highly talked-about issue in the political arena of Bangladesh, especially when AL is at the helm of the government. In the eyes of AL's political opponents, lack of sovereignty primarily refers to "selling out the country" to our giant neighbour. It has played the sovereignty card so indiscriminately that the accusation has now become like "crying wolf" in the eyes of our general mass.

However, this time around, in the issue of trial of the alleged war criminals, the moment has arrived for the current government to validate the real sovereignty of the nation.

The trial of war criminals is an important element in AL's election manifesto. Its resounding election victory was considered a strong endorsement for the promised trial. The endorsement was more emphatic for the fact that a large chunk of young voters who, in spite of the fact that they were taught a distorted history of our great War of Liberation, came out in large numbers and voted for the AL-led alliance. Subsequently, a resolution was also

unanimously passed on January 29 in the maiden sitting of the ninth parliament, albeit in the absence of the main opposition, calling on the government to ensure immediate trial of the war criminals.

Planning Minister A.K. Khandaker, who was the deputy commander-in-chief of the Liberation War forces and currently the president of the Sector Commanders Forum, which has been spearheading the nation-wide campaign to try the war criminals, thanked parliament for adopting the resolution.

In his words: "People will sleep in peace tonight. For many, it's the beginning of the end of the torment they have been enduring for 38 long years." The prime minister, echoing the sentiment of the house declared: "Trial of the war criminals is now a demand of the nation."

As the resolution was passed in the parliament, the government (not AL anymore) is under obligation to ensure the trial of war criminals. The commitment of the government was re-emphasised by the Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Shafique Ahmed on February 3, when he said: "Since it's a resolution adopted by the legislature, the government

will now assume responsibility for the trial."

In the last few months, however, there were conflicting and confusing statements from the responsible sources of the government about the process and time-line of the appointment of investigation officers and public prosecutors. After the PM's visit to Saudi Arabia at the end of last April, it went all quiet on the trial front. There were a lot of speculations and rumours spreading around about the pressure of that powerful oil-rich kingdom not to proceed with the trials.

The basis of those rumours has been revealed, though not by naming any particular country, by the general secretary of AL and influential minister Syed Ashrafur Islam who, on August 19, disclosed: "The government is facing pressure from different quarters at home and abroad for not trying the war criminals of 1971. We are facing obstacles in bringing the war criminals to trial. But we are putting in our best efforts to overcome them." The minister must be given due credit for being partly transparent instead of letting the public continue making second guesses.

Having said that, the "internal" and the "external" pressure that the minister was referring to was nothing unexpected. The government, however, can never evade its responsibility of following through with its own election pledge. On the internal front, apparently, the scenario is more conducive that expected.

The main opposition's false belief that it could win an election with the support of the vote bank of the alleged war criminals, no matter what, was proven wrong in the last general election. None of its



To try or not to try is our decision.

spokespersons has so far issued any public statement either supporting or opposing the trial.

Quite to the contrary, it has given a momentous opportunity to the main opposition to challenge the government to prove the existence of the sovereignty of the Republic, the lack of which they very often refer to, by following through on its electoral promise of holding the trial. The government, on the other hand, has an obligation to divulge to the public the elements of the source of "internal" pressure other than the alleged war criminals themselves.

The source of external pressure has never been a difficult riddle to solve. After the defeat of the occupation forces in 1971, a number of alleged war criminals found a

safe haven in that land and continued their anti-Bangladesh campaign, spreading lies and distortions, until August 15 of 1975.

The country in question does not have any major investment in Bangladesh and as such does not control any components of Bangladesh's internal economy. However, just like any other oil-rich middle-eastern country, it employs a huge number of Bangladeshi workforce.

This leverage of a foreign country, no matter how powerful it is, should never be allowed to keep our government hostage in deterring the implementation of an overwhelmingly endorsed election pledge of a freely elected government.

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great challenge as well as an opportunity for the government to validate the sovereignty of the Republic by neutralising the pressure, and to establish that it is the people of Bangladesh themselves who hold the ultimate authority in deciding the course of their own destiny.

In this context, it would be worthwhile to cite an incident that occurred in 1993-94, reflecting how the tiny island nation of Singapore kept its head high in upholding its sovereignty and dignity. An eighteen-year old boy, who happened to be a US citizen, was found guilty of writing graffiti on a car. A court convicted him and awarded him "ten rounds of caning," a common punishment for this kind of crime in Singaporean law.

The then US President Bill Clinton wrote to Singapore PM requesting him to commute the sentence on humanitarian grounds, considering the harshness of the punishment. The then senior minister Lee Kuan Yew, the father of modern Singapore, wrote back to President Clinton, shrugging off the fact that more than fifty percent of the investments in Singapore belonged to US companies: "If we yield to US pressure and make an exception to the verdict of our own judicial system, we lose our moral authority to govern ourselves."

Should we not expect a similar affirmation for upholding the sovereignty and dignity of our nation vis-à-vis "pressure from different quarters at home and abroad" from our honourable prime minister?

Dr. Mozammel H. Khan is the Convenor of the Canadian Committee for Human Rights and Democracy in Bangladesh.

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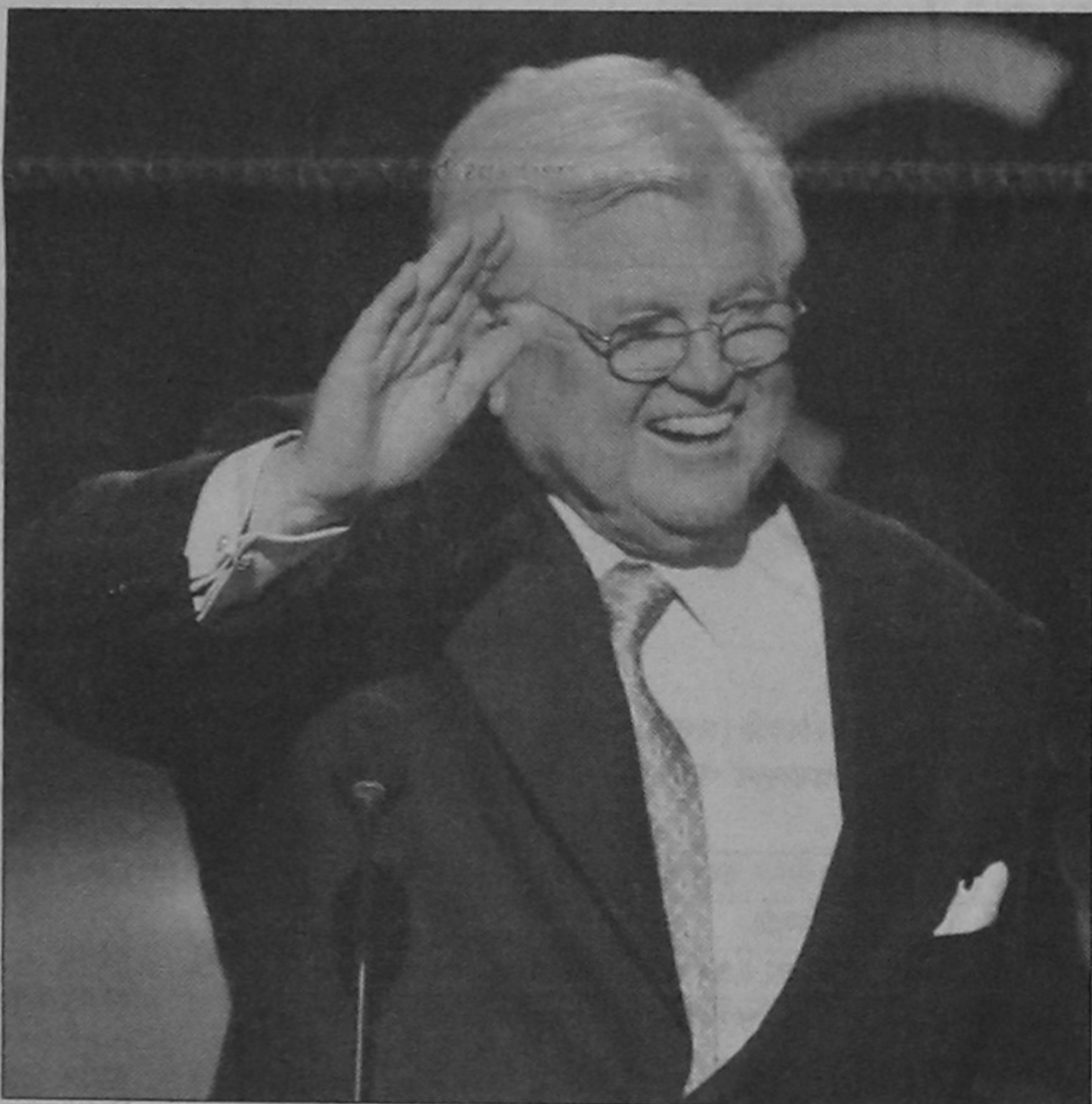
Edward Kennedy -- with him passes the magic

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

EDWARD Moore Kennedy's death from brain cancer at the age of seventy-seven brings to an end a career that consistently occupied centre stage in American politics. Kennedy was one of those men fortunate enough to be part of the political dynasty set in place by Joseph P. Kennedy, the affluent businessman who once served as Franklin Delano Roosevelt's ambassador to the Court of St. James in London.

Paradoxically, Edward Kennedy's life was lived in the midst of tragedy brought on by high ambition. The eldest of his brothers, Joe, lost his life in action as an air force pilot in the Second World War. Joe was the brother who should have been president if their father had had his way. That ambition was then transferred to John Kennedy, who eventually made it to Congress and the Senate, and then to the White House. JFK's inauguration in 1961 was verily the rise to prominence of America's most famous political dynasty, for it would herald the arrival of Joseph Kennedy's third son Robert on the scene, as attorney general.

But then things began to fall apart. The centre could not hold. President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas in November 1963. The next year, Robert Kennedy sought and won a New York



Edward Moore Kennedy

senate seat and was soon being touted as a future president. That moment nearly

came, and then went, in 1968. RFK seemed poised to win the Democratic

nomination for president and might have gone on to win the White House had not an assassin put a bullet through his head in Los Angeles in June 1968. That was tragedy at its peak.

Despite that, some in the Democratic Party thought Edward Kennedy could be convinced to run in his brother's place. He was right in saying no, for as the last surviving Kennedy he was now officially the family patriarch.

But early in 1969, even as Richard Nixon prepared to take charge as America's new president, Edward Kennedy, Ted as he was known by and large, beat a veteran Democratic senator to become the party whip. Almost instantly, people were talking of a presidential race between him and Nixon in 1972.

The gods, of course, had other things in store for him. In summer, accompanied by a young woman named Mary Jo Kopechne in a car, he left a party. Soon the car was in the water. Kennedy staggered out of the vehicle, went home and did not inform the police until hours later of the tragedy. It was then that Kopechne's body was recovered from inside the car in the water. Kennedy's presidential ambitions went up in smoke.

And yet Ted Kennedy survived that

enormity of a tragedy. He was, in a sense, a comeback kid. He had come through a plane crash with an injured back in 1964. He had seen his brothers die in unnatural manner, two of them at the hands of assassins. One of his sisters had been in an asylum all her life. His son suffered from debilitating health. A time would come when his wife Joan would leave him.

After 1969, he set out to rebuild his career. In the senate, to which he had been elected in 1962 at age thirty (the seat had been vacated by JFK when he was elected president), he sponsored legislation on issues that exercised the imagination in America. It was always the social causes -- civil liberties, medicare, et cetera -- he focused on. But, of course, there was that occasional beat in the heart, which told him he needed to be president. He sought the Democratic Party nomination in 1980, against incumbent President Jimmy Carter. It ended in disaster, for him and for Carter. Kennedy did not get the nomination; and Carter was not re-elected. It was the beginning of the Reagan era. But, at the Democratic convention, Kennedy captured the public imagination once again, through a soaring concession speech that invoked Tennyson's Ulysses "one equal temper of heroic hearts [...] to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield."

Edward Kennedy's death is not the passing of a torch from one generation of Kennedys to another, for his nephews and nieces have never been able to match him and his brothers in the beauty of their grace and the intensity of their ambitions. From that perspective, therefore, Kennedy's death is the end of a dynasty, the likes of which may never be again.

The magic that once underlined the Kennedy name (in 1962, Ted Kennedy's rival for the senate seat taunted him, "If your name had been Edward Moore Kennedy, your candidacy would be a joke") dies with him. Massachusetts loses a callow young politician who over the decades graduated to a veteran, deeply respected senator. Americans do not have in their midst any more the good, handsome man who chose the right causes to fight for (he moved heaven and earth in 1971 in defence of Bangladesh) and went all the way to uphold those causes.

In life, Edward Kennedy epitomised, for all his flaws, the values that underpinned life. In death, he becomes a hearkening back to an era that was as substantive in meaning as it was vibrant in an expression of its demands.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star. E-mail: bahsantareq@yahoo.co.uk.

And now it is Jaswant Singh

What has happened to Jaswant Singh exceeds what happened to Advani: BJP hardliners have thrown him out of BJP altogether. Insofar as one can see he is made of sterner stuff. He will continue to stand by what he has written.

M.B. NAQVI

M.R. Jaswant Singh's book *Jinnah-India, Partition, Independence* was released a few days ago. Jaswant Singh has traversed the same territory that Lal Krishan Advani did a few years ago while on a visit to Pakistan, calling Mr. Jinnah a great Indian.

Jaswant Singh went much further. He has written a book to show that Jinnah was a patriotic Indian and that Nehru and Gandhi drove him into a corner and forced him to become a communalist. While he was ready until May 1946 to have a united India, it was Nehru who shot down the Cabinet Mission plan that Jinnah had accepted -- and Nehru had earlier accepted.

What has happened to Jaswant Singh exceeds what happened to Advani: BJP hardliners have thrown him out of BJP altogether. Insofar as one can see he is made of sterner stuff. He will continue to stand by what he has written. After all

it is a whole book. It is not an odd statement here or there. We must accept that the opinions expressed in the book are his firm opinions and that he is likely to stand by them.

BJP's election results have shown one consistency. It's the absence of Muslim votes. The Muslims as a rule do not vote BJP. It now seems that praising Jinnah could be a clever way of winning over the Muslim votes in future. The risks involved in this seem to have proved greater than the possible benefits.

Why should any rightwing Indian risk his reputation and position by praising Jinnah at this stage? Jinnah has been demonised in India, good and proper. Most Indians have a very low opinion of him. They think that he alone was responsible for the vivisection of Bharat Mata and he is not to be accepted as one of their own.

India and Pakistan have their own backwoods, men, who continue to live in 1947. BJP's fortunes vis-à-vis Muslim votes will not turn so easily. The very

fact that most BJP leaders were absent from the book launching function showed that they were going to dump Jaswant Singh and demonise him for his heresy.

But Mr. Jaswant Singh isn't a fool. He can be credited with a certain amount of courage and honesty of purpose. If he has written that Jinnah was a great Indian nationalist, he has to go on owning up to it. He has already paid a heavy price.

But the fact remains that Indian Muslims have written a certain history; they have never voted en bloc for any BJP candidate. That must set some of the more intelligent and thoughtful Indians thinking. The difficulty with the enquiry is that the answers are known to those who will be soul searching on the subject.

The BJP has a record of demonising Indian Muslims as a whole, not to mention incidents like 1969 Ahmedabad and the recent riots in Gujarat. It is hardly possible for Mr. Jaswant Singh to get any immediate political dividend from the book; Muslims are not going to make him their darling suddenly.

The reasons for this change in someone who has been BJP government's foreign and finance minister will have to be sought somewhere in his vision of the future. Somewhere in the recesses of his

mind, there is the thought that some 18% to 20% Muslims of India cannot be ignored electorally and politically. More so as Hindu vote has been split.

Apart from the Left and Right, there are caste divisions. The caste-based parties will always ask: "Aren't we Hindu, why have the upper castes maltreated us over all the years, the Dalits, the Yadavs and others who have now joined politics?" There is no homogenised simple Hindu in India, there are Brahmins, Vashiyas, Kashtriyas and Banyas or lower castes.

There may be no simple, unexplained Hindu. BJP requires the unity of such homogenised Hindus who would put the minorities in their proper place. Where is BJP to find such Hindus? They are simply not there. All they have is hundreds of castes and sub-castes and sub-sub-castes.

BJP can be said to be a party of the richer Hindu middle class. That section of Indians has set its heart on making India a great power. To them India is already semi-superpower. What is standing its way to full superpowerdom? One realisation seems to be growing; unless India takes along its immediate neighbours, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal et al it may not reach the desired goal. It will have to stop short of that desirable destiny. Taking Pakistan and other

neighbours along is a hard job; it requires a more inclusive politics at home, that BJP has not ventured into.

Men like Jaswant Singh, or even Natwar Singh, have been looking for more inclusive politics that can take in all the Indians. No doubt, they see the need for rapprochement or understanding or working arrangement with the Left. In fact Left is no longer one. It too is splintered into many schools.

A certain kind of politics, based on an amalgam of unalloyed globalisation of the economy with the kind that will allow the middle class to take some schools of the Left with them, might emerge. But caste politics threatens India's unity as radically as does religious communalism.

India and Pakistan have bickered for 55 years. They have tried to harm each other and have succeeded to an extent. The antagonistic politics and foreign policies that the two countries have run so far need also to be reassessed by fair-minded Indians. Can they do so?

The first thing they have to do is to undemonise one another.

Apart from the fact that there is a valid case for India to court Pakistan, there is the question of judging what Pakistan is or what its significance is. It would be foolish to pretend that Pakistan does not suffer from many ailments, including Islamic terrorism. Pakistan is on a course for self-destruction. There is no doubt about that.

There are any numbers of insurgencies in the country going on. It has to set its house in order. Its more developed Punjab should lead because a change has to come over Punjab. Punjab is where a new industrial-commercial middle class has arisen, and wants a change in basic policies.

Apart from democratic space for itself, it now wants free trade with India, allowing India permission for overland trading with Afghanistan and Central Asia. They would welcome Indian investments. This is a great change and opportunity for India. It's bound to be reflected eventually in the foreign policy of the country. But if the Indians show any willingness to change and to be more accommodative, the change can come much earlier. It's for sober Indians to judge.

M.B. Naqvi is a leading Pakistani columnist.