

KALEIDOSCOPE

Consensus, not confrontation, is the key

Assuming extreme positions Seek solution through dialogue

BEGUM Zia has rejected the PM's offer of a dialogue saying that there is no scope for talks and that the government must resign while ensuring that the caretaker system stays. She is prepared to discuss on, what she calls, an acceptable caretaker government only after the present government resigns. The BNP chief has not however elaborated what according to her would be an "acceptable" caretaker government.

While the PM said that the government was open to suggestions, her previous statement carried an element of finality on the issue of caretaker government. And the PM cited judicial compulsion in this regard. The matter has been further confused with different people in the government and the ruling party coming out with their own interpretations of the verdict.

We have said in this very column repeatedly that in politics there is no scope for inflexibility. Rigid positions and the stand off between the major political parties in the past had led to serious consequences. We regret to say that, if anything, the distance has increased and with it the animus between the AL and BNP.

We must admit that the PM's comments had sent out mixed signals, and she must clarify her position when she says that the government is not rigid on the caretaker issue, and that the government is indeed honest about finding a way out of the likely impasse.

We cannot but express our consternation at the direction politics is moving towards. Given the already charged political situation the articulated positions of the parties cannot sit well with the general public who would not like to see similar situation as that of October 2006 revisit us.

The Supreme Court verdict, while declaring the 13th Amendment illegal, has however suggested that two general elections could be held under the caretaker system. There is always a way out provided there is honest political will, which we hope both the parties would display.

Unauthorised sawmills

Act to save the environment

THE observance of World Environment Day in Bangladesh yesterday could not have been a cheering exercise. With the country now home to only 10 per cent of forests where the global required standard is 25 per cent, it is time to ask why we have consistently failed to roll back the damage systematically being done to our environment. Part of the answer comes from reports of a blatant, illegal felling of trees in what is officially known as the Sakhipur reserve forests in the Madhupur region. Over the last two and a half years, no fewer than 52 sawmills have been set up illegally, and with the full knowledge of the authorities, in the area. That is a shame. The bigger shame, though, is that the Department of Forests seems powerless to do anything about it since ruling party people are allegedly involved in the illegal business.

At a time when conservation, indeed a rapid augmentation of forests is called for, the depletion of greenery in Sakhipur arouses grave concerns in the public mind. Such illegal activities in the area are not new. The whole ugly business began prior to 2006, and the caretaker government that followed did well by knocking down all the unauthorised sawmills set up there. Today, things are back to square one. Where no sawmill should be built within ten kilometres of a reserve forest, we have 52 operating within 100-200 metres of the forests.

That a nexus of corruption involving forestry officials and local ruling party elements is at work here cannot be ruled out. Such corruption and everything else going wrong with the forests must be stamped out now. As it is, lopsided urban development has already led to a disappearance of trees in towns and cities. If now it is the turn of reserve forests and other green spots to lose their basic elements, it will be stark environmental disaster we will soon be staring at. Will the government wake up to the danger?



SYED FATAHUL ALAM

THE political atmosphere of the country is heating up fast over whether the system of caretaker government will

continue or not. The main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has already called a country-wide hartal on Sunday, while Awami League (AL)-led ruling combine is against keeping the caretaker government system alive to hold the next parliamentary elections.

The apparently stiff stance taken by both the dominant political camps has again pushed the nation to the brink of a fresh crisis and uncertainty.

It is not that the party in power and that in opposition are quite strangers to this kind of stalemate. But as they had done in the past, the old blame game is still the stuff of their conduct. And in the characteristic style of the past, a section of the intelligentsia is toeing its party lines blindly in the talk shows on television or columns in the print media. The professional bodies, too, are getting gradually polarised for and against the issue of caretaker system. And the history, as it was, is being reenacted. People in the evening of June 4 (Saturday) witnessed with awe how the police were beating up processionists, though the government was saying that they would not create any obstacle to the opposition's democratic rights to hold rallies and protest marches. However, the government made it clear that it has nothing to do, if people themselves resist the rallies or protest marches organised by the opposition.

It is exactly at this point that anxiety of the peace-loving citizens heightens.

The ruling party or the opposition has their people. They resist the opposition's political programmes or the opposition the ruling party's. And all these happen in the name of the people. But the man in the street, who really represents the largest portion of the silent majority hardly recognises those "people" who wield clubs or

brandish firearms in hot pursuit of protest marchers or foil the rallies organised by the opposition. In fact, the experience is common whichever of the two major political parties is in office at a particular time.

And vandalising roadside shops, cars on the street, stoning buses crammed with passengers or carrying out arson attacks on buses remain the usual scenes on any hartal day or in evenings before the hartal day.

To scrap the caretaker system, the government is basing its argument mainly on the May 13 Supreme Court (SC) Appellate Division's verdict on the 13th amendment to the

Parliamentary Committee on constitutional amendment, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in her May 30 statement said that the provision of CG system should be dropped from the constitution.

We think this is not the final position of the government. There is still time to have a rethink on the whole issue and find a way out by engaging the opposition in a dialogue to resolve the problem. The other option is invite more trouble.

The caretaker system, introduced in 1996 at the peak of a movement staged by the then opposition Awami League and its camp followers, was the prod-



CHAD BAKER

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Constitution. It termed the caretaker system of government void. Though the verdict is yet to be published in full, the government has taken a rigid position referring to the SC verdict. It may be noted here that the SC verdict did not outright say that the caretaker system should be abolished immediately. A senior advocate of the SC Rafique-ul Haque, for example, at a discussion pointed out that the SC verdict rather favoured the existence of the caretaker system, particularly for the next two general elections, citing it as a "doctrine of necessity."

Addressing the Special

uct of the then incumbent BNP's rigid stance of holding next general election under Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) appointed by it. The deadlock began. The ruling party stubbornly stuck to its guns and held the controversial general election of February 15, 1996 that was boycotted by the opposition. The 6th Jatiya Sangsad (JS), which was the outcome of that election and was considered by the opposition as illegitimate, brought the 13th amendment to the constitution introducing the provision of neutral non-partisan caretaker government.

The first general election under the

caretaker system of government was held on June 12, 1996, in which Awami League came out victorious. But the badly battered BNP did not accept the result.

But old habits die hard. Like before now the focus of the ruling parties was fixed on the last retired Chief Justice at the fag end of the party in power. The aim was to have a party camp follower who would be the next head of the caretaker government. In the October 1, 2001 general election for the 8th Jatiya Sangsad, the BNP came out victorious. As usual, the opposition Awami League rejected the polls result.

Accusing the ruling BNP-led 4-party alliance government of massive corruption and protesting what it called the alliance's attempt to prejudice the next JS polls by appointing a chief justice of its choice, the Awami League and its allies launched a movement. But this time, the army took over through the famed 1/11 putsch. They installed the last caretaker government that lasted for two years instead of 3 months, thereby in a way contravening the provision of caretaker government according to 13th amendment to the constitution. The polls for the 9th Jatiya Sangsad held in December 2008 saw the thumping victory of the Awami League-led electoral combine. The marginalised BNP rejected the polls result outright.

The history of caretaker is too familiar to political observers. But it was necessary to show that it was never the system, but the attitude of the two major parties that made the electoral systems controversial. Their limitless greed for power and the ill-motive to stay in power forever by fair means or foul was the primitive sin that destroyed the electoral institutions of the country.

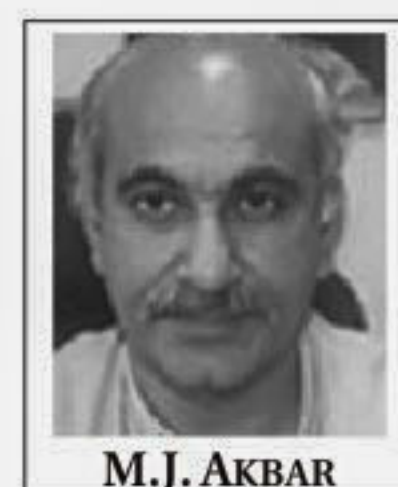
The two major parties should have become wiser in the meantime. Then they must change their attitudes and realise that one-upmanship and calling the other's bluff hardly ever pays in the long run.

Now it is time they saw reason. To avoid another 1/11, they must reach a consensus to settle on a solution. The sooner that is done the better.

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BYLINE

Party Singh vs Government Singh



M.J. AKBAR

HAS the time come for the Congress high command to issue notices to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, his virtual

deputy Pranab Mukherjee and his principal interlocutor for officially unofficial dialogue Kapil Sibal, for gross violation of discipline? If it cannot muster up the courage to censure its own PM, it could always expel General Secretary Digvijay Singh. The party Singh wants to send Baba Ramdev to prison or perdition, whichever is nearer.

The government Singh believes that acrobatic subservience by four ministers in the VIP lounge of Delhi airport, rather than within the more private environment of a drawing room, before the crusader-Baba, is the way forward to an honest India in which every politician glistens with moral fervour, and anyone giving or taking a bribe gets the noose he deserves.

It must be the summer. The government's brain has melted. Whatever else may be your view of Baba Ramdev, you have to be a bit soft to believe he can be bribed by flattery. The Baba has not risen from a bicycle in Haryana to a private jet by being gullible. He is playing for much higher stakes.

The prime minister had two options when confronted by a "fast unto death." He could either negotiate with a man who had everything

to gain by confrontation; or he could have gone over Baba Ramdev's head, as it were, and spoken directly to the India that was lining up in support of the Baba, not just in Delhi but in every small town. Better still, he could have done both; negotiate at a minimalist level, and address India's core concern comprehensively, decisively. The multiple negotiations with Ramdev have not only raised the latter's stature in public life, but also ensured that the credit for any decision will go not to Dr. Singh's government but to the man who generated a mid-summer day's thunderstorm.

Pressure is guaranteed to ensure mistakes in decision-making. Dr. Manmohan Singh would have handled pressure from opposition parties, but is unable to deal with parallel stress from two different, but inter-linked points. The anger of the people has derailed governance. But his most difficult challenge is neither from the people nor from a crusader; it is from a faction within Congress that derives its power from proximity to Mrs. Sonia Gandhi.

Digvijay Singh is the main spokesman of this faction, which is why he has the freedom to offer a continuous stream of alternative policy

advice, on every matter from Assam to Kashmir, depending on the news of the day. Digvijay Singh has done more to weaken the authority of Dr. Manmohan Singh than anyone else; and a mute prime minister's helplessness before this onslaught only confirms the power equations within today's Congress.

Mrs. Sonia Gandhi has also empowered her parallel cabinet, the NAC, which believes that Dr. Singh's cabinet and Parliament should listen to its instructions. Some of its members specialise in pomposity when they are not heckling the prime minister. The strategy is transparent: to snatch credit if the government does anything right, and turn stridently accusatory if the government makes a mistake.

The BJP has to do nothing to destabilise the Manmohan Singh government, which is crumbling under the pressure of internal contradictions. Opposition parties need to do nothing except wait. Once upon a time they did not know how to. Now they have learnt it.

Inevitable question: how long can a dysfunctional government totter around? Technically, forever [caveat: forever comes in 2014, the year of the next scheduled general elections]. The mathematics of this

Parliament works in favour of the establishment. M. Karunanidhi may publicly rue the poor choice of friends he has made, meaning the Congress, but politically there is nothing he can do.

Potential new allies are in no hurry to touch a DMK toxic with corruption charges. Regional animosities in other states create a curious algebra. It would take some catastrophe, for instance, to bring Mulayam Singh Yadav's SP and Mayawati's BSP on the same side of the voting platform in Parliament. But is this impossible?

Dr. Manmohan Singh's government is not in any danger of being washed away by some sudden flood or devastated by an earthquake; its foundations are being eroded by inbred worms. Dr. Singh is flashing a sword, slashing the heart of a former cabinet colleague here, breaking the arm of a private sector executive, which makes for temporary political theatre. What he needs is very powerful pesticide, to be sprayed at home. The disease of corruption is not limited to enemies or allies who might have become dispensable. The Congress seems to believe that it can get away by speaking in multiple voices, each customised for whichever audience is in the hall.

Baba Ramdev has a significant advantage over the Congress in this test of wills. He has nothing to lose. The Congress does: it could lose power.

The columnist is editor of The Sunday Guardian, published from Delhi, India on Sunday, published from London and Editorial Director, India Today and Headlines Today.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

June 6

- 1674** Shivaji, founder of the Maratha empire is coronated.
- 1939** German dictator Adolf Hitler gives a public address to returning German volunteers who fought as Legion Kondor during the Spanish Civil War.
- 1944** World War II: Battle of Normandy begins. D-Day, code named Operation Overlord, commences with the landing of 155,000 Allied troops on the beaches of Normandy in France. The allied soldiers quickly break through the Atlantic Wall and push inland in the largest amphibious military operation in history.
- 1971** Vietnam War: The Battle of Long Khanh between Australian and Vietnamese communist forces begins.
- 1982** 1982 Lebanon War begins: Forces under Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon invade southern Lebanon in their "Operation Peace for the Galilee", eventually reaching as far north as the capital Beirut.
- 1984** The Indian Army attacks the Golden Temple in Amritsar following an order from Indira Gandhi. Official casualties are 576 combatants killed and 335 wounded; independent observers estimate that thousands of unarmed Sikh civilians are also killed in the crossfire. A total death count adds up to almost 6,000.