

Khaleda's signal can be built up on

AL should seize the opportunity

FOR the first time since the ruling AL and the opposition BNP locked their horns on caretaker issue, we think, Begum Zia has indicated a willingness to have talks with the ruling party if the caretaker system were retained. Though the prime minister had initially ruled out the retention of CTG 'after the court verdict', lately she has been making repeated overtures to the opposition leader urging her to place her formula for CTG reform on the table. This, she felt, was necessitated by the SC verdict as well as the experience with the abuse of the system in 2007-08.

However, following the opposition leader's positive signal to the PM's initiative for an engagement, some AL leaders have expressed views that did not resonate with the PM's latest stand. One part of the SC verdict allows for two-term use of the caretaker system on the basis of understanding between political parties. Moreover, in an 'observation' the SC added that if political parties agreed, higher judiciary can be delinked from caretaker system.

So materially as well as interpretatively, there is no point hammering that there is no scope for continuing with the CTG after the court verdict. For, such a position does not only militate with SC verdict but also sounds discordant with the PM's own positive approach to engaging the opposition.

Now that Begum Zia has shown signs of reciprocating the PM's gesture, and the BNP is speaking with one voice, the trend needs to be built up on and taken forward with sagacity. In this context, we expect all AL leaders to speak with one voice and fall in line with the PM.

While we appreciate the opposition leader's positive response for dialogue, we urge her to join the parliament without any loss of time to put across her ideas of caretaker reform as the ruling party too engages the opposition over its points to arrive at a common ground. It is the House of the people through which an effective and conclusive outcome can be reached. They can make the fullest use of the parliamentary forum while an option for agitation remains, short of hartal, of course, which is detrimental to national interest.

Toxic tastes Calls for coordinated action

FOOD is the basic necessity for life and there is nothing worse than adulterating it. Yet, many fruit orchard owners, traders and distributors are unabashedly ripening and preserving the natural produce using all kinds of unnatural chemicals. A mobile court has recently destroyed around 30,000 toxic bananas in Pabna Sadar upazila. But it's only one of many such cases.

This being the height of mango season, calcium carbide comes in to play with all its black magic to ripen and colour the fruits.

But then, a lot of these practitioners in the vice when asked don't know just how harmful carbide is. It readies fruits in a day to be shipped for a quick buck. Carbide, if consumed, can damage kidney, heart and liver and cause ulcer and gastric, according to experts.

Maybe the food adulterators are not aware of the range of risk involved or maybe they just don't care. And this isn't helped at all by pharmacies selling calcium carbide to just anyone with the requisite number of currency notes.

The government needs to reach out to these fruit adulterators and educate them more exhaustively about the long term lethal effects of such selfish gains. Not only that, horticulturists need to acquaint them with the natural cycles of plucking the fruits and their maturity. What is the difference between money made in May and that in June? Perhaps there is an issue of storage to be addressed.

Once these precautionary steps are in place, the rule of law must be applied in full force against the errant traders. After all, the right to safe food is one of the most fundamental of human rights.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

June 18

1429 French forces under the leadership of Joan of Arc defeat the main English army under Sir John Fastolf at the Battle of Patay. This turns the tide of the Hundred Years' War.

1815 Napoleonic Wars: The Battle of Waterloo results in the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte by the Duke of Wellington forcing him to abdicate the throne of France for the second and last time.

1830 French invasion of Algeria

1900 Empress Dowager Longyu of China orders all foreigners killed, including foreign diplomats and their families.

1953 The Republic of Egypt is declared and the monarchy is abolished.

1979 SALT II is signed by the United States and the Soviet Union.

1981 A disease cluster, which will later be known as AIDS, is recognized by medical professionals in San Francisco, California.

STRAIGHT LINE

Behind the caretaker controversy



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

POLITICAL climate in Bangladesh, as of now, is ominously hot. The acrimonious debate centres around the retention or otherwise of the constitutionally incorporated neutral and non-partisan caretaker arrangement that oversees the general election. The apex court while pronouncing on the illegality of the caretaker dispensation has perhaps taken note of the political and administrative reality on ground. It is thus no wonder that while declaring the arrangement prospectively void, it has reportedly recommended the retention of the same for two more general elections.

Once the full text of the judgment on the caretaker issue is available, the pros and cons would be better understood. What, however, might be difficult, if not impossible, is to reasonably reduce the trust deficit between the major political parties of the country. Therein lies the crux of the whole controversy because the caretaker concept became a constitutional reality on account of the untrustworthiness of a political government.

In most democracies the incumbent political government oversees the election after reducing its size to the bare minimum necessary for carrying out the routine work. The constitutional bodies, the services and the regulatory institutions do their mandated job for the smooth conduction of the election. Everything runs as usual as has been the case in the recently conducted general election in neighbouring West Bengal state of India.

In Bangladesh, however, owing to reasons that are well-known, we cannot put our faith in the normal arrangement. The suspicion, therefore, is that those institutions that ensure fair election may have been adversely incapacitated. If that be so, how has it happened? Additionally pertinent is the query as to whether the proposed strengthening of the election commission, in isolation, would guarantee fair election.

It would be worth noting that when a republic comes to birth, it is the leaders who produce the institutions. Later, it is the institutions which produce the leaders. Sadly, in our case eloquence has flourished most when public affairs were in the deplorable conditions. Consequently, we find ourselves at a crossroads of history insofar as our democratic progression in concerned. The premonition is, if we take too many faulty steps and mistake the dross for the gold we shall render ourselves unfit for civilised conduction of public affairs.

The civil service owes its loyalty to the government of the day, irrespective of political party and it is imperative that the service avoids creating the impression of political bias. The service has to serve

governments of all political persuasions. The civil servants are expected to conduct themselves in a manner that they deserve and retain the confidence of ministers and be able to establish the same relationship with those whom they may be required to serve in some future administration.

The above is the desirable course but our ground reality is the steady erosion of bureaucratic ethos and politicisation of the service. Professionalism, competence and honesty, the hallmarks of a hallowed system is allegedly giving way to cronyism and pliability. Favours are being given to so-called loyal and partisan officials who would unlawfully

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please their superiors. In such a situation it is becoming increasingly difficult to keep faith in the impartiality and integrity of public servants who are crucial in ensuring fair election.

Insofar as the regulatory agencies are concerned, the allegation is that the interests of the State have often mixed up with the interests of the party in power. Consequently, all concerned are losing faith in the propriety of the actions of such bodies that play a vital role in fair and orderly conduction of election.

The need is to ensure that public servants are not preoccupied with inconsequential matters to the detriment of national interests. This is paramount because in our situation public leaders are publicly expressing doubts about the neutrality and integrity of vital organs of the State whose functions can neither be arrogated to others nor be privatised. Therefore, the fears of public about fair election need to be allayed.

Over the years, in Bangladesh the polarization of different occupational and service organisations

along the political lines has caused concern. The appointees of particular years are considered more loyal and pliable and are rewarded causing manifest discrimination. Such actions are adversely affecting the administrations that are pivotal in ensuring fair election.

The responsibility for creating and sustaining an impartial and fair public service principally falls on political leadership. They have to be strongly and actively supported by the judiciary and the media, amongst others. The alleged polarisation and divisive trends have to be effectively halted in order for the incumbent political government to be accept-



WAHID ADNAN/DRINKNEWS

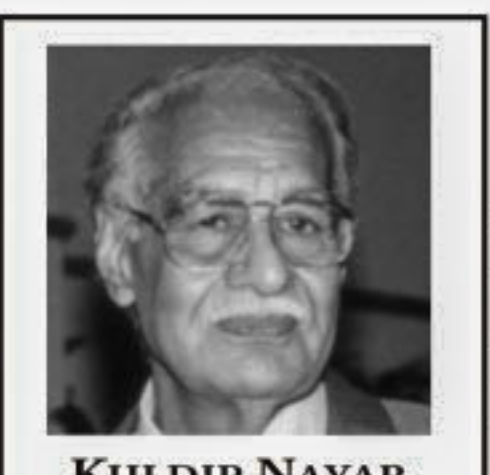
ably charged with the responsibility of overseeing the general election.

We will do well to remember that modern State is a political contrivance for civilised people to lead a lawful life and the impartial and dispassionate performance of some vital State institutions, made possible by political wisdom, largely ensure the success of such an existence. Prominent among these institutions are the judiciary, the Election Commission, the public service and the media whose positive role guarantee the fulfilment of societal goals.

The State must not be stripped of its benevolent character and the government should not appear less than representative by reason of partisan action. Those in charge of the affairs of the State and their likely successors should look beyond the immediate compulsions in order to be true guardians. The imperative is to create ethos befitting a democracy.

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BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDIP NAYAR

IT'S a welcome development that New Delhi has found time to hold talks with Pakistan in the midst of internal upheavals that the Manmohan Singh government faces. Foreign secretaries of the two

countries are meeting later this month at Islamabad. They talked to each other during the summit at Thimpu, Bhutan, in February but apparently found little time to pursue any topic.

No agenda has been announced so far. But the talks Indian Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao has had with the visiting Pakistani journalists indicate that India would like to resume the dialogue. Her statement that the bilateral dialogue was meant to bring the 26/11 perpetrators to justice may create difficulties. This has been hanging fire for two and a half years. True, Pakistan Foreign Secretary Salman Bashir has been blunt enough to say that the 26/11 attacks were "an incident of the past" as if Islamabad has already put the tragedy behind it.

I sensed the same approach when some TV channels from Pakistan interviewed me a few days ago. They said that when it had been decided between the two countries to separate terrorism from the talks, India should not get stuck at the 26/11 happenings. What they do not understand -- I told them so -- is that there is great anger over the use of Pakistani soil for an attack on Mumbai.

Had some culprits got punished or been near to it, people in India would have believed that Islamabad was serious about the speedy trial. Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) chief Hafiz Saeed, who helped plan and execute the attacks, goes on ranting and has no full stop in his jihadi threats against New Delhi.

David Headley's acquittal of involvement in the 26/11 attacks at the Chicago trial has come as a big disappointment to India. And the general suspicion is that the US did not want the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) to be singled out. This seems far fetched when the US itself told us of the "involvement" of the ISI. Moreover, to suspect the US court and the jury for pronouncing anti-India judgment is not fair. Every country has its own legal system.

However, Headley has damaged the ISI enough by admitting in the open court that terror outfit

Lashkar-e-Toiba got "assistance" from Pakistan's ISI for the Mumbai terror attack. It is difficult to buy the thesis that the ISI, feared at home, is at the back of terrorists because they have killed many army men. And there is no doubt that the ISI is manned and controlled by the army.

It is possible that some rouge elements in the ISI might be helping the Taliban. It is also possible that some jihad-inclined men within the army might be harming the force. But it does not follow from this that the Taliban have the support of the ISI or the army.

The case of India is different in the sense that Pakistan considers it an enemy. The ISI must have been in the picture on the 26/11 attacks. If the question before us is to normalise relations with Pakistan, we cannot ask it to admit that the ISI is an instrument in the hands of the army or, for that matter, Pakistan. We have to live with it to go further. They too have doubts about RAW,

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although exaggerated.

Indeed, New Delhi went against public opinion in India when it began talks with Islamabad after a long suspension. For most, it is the punishment of the 26/11 perpetrators or nothing else. But now that the dialogue is taking place it should be part of the agenda which can cover other subjects. No doubt, the home, water resources, commerce and defence secretaries of the two countries have met in the last one year. But there does not seem to have been any progress. It is difficult to know which country is to blame because there is no transparency.

The two sides meet and disperse, often without even any clich  -ridden statement. People do not know why the Sir Creek agreement, ready to be signed, has not been signed. Nor do they know why the Siachin Glacier pact, initiated by the then Prime

Minister Rajiv Gandhi, has not gone through, continuing a loss of crores of rupees to both sides every day. Pakistan has given a non-paper on the subject. What does it say? People do not know what the paper contains because only its publication would enable them to make their own judgment.

The problem with the dialogue between India and Pakistan has been that the public is kept out of what takes place during the talks. Which country took what stand and why does the dialogue not move forward from what was discussed some 60 years ago? The army is being blamed but the elected representatives, neither Zulfikar Ali Bhutto nor Begum Benazir Bhutto, could end the impasse. Conceded that there is a trust deficit, but this is at the government level. People on both sides want to normalise relations but they have not been able to do so because the governments come in their way. They are not even allowed to meet because of the visa restrictions, which are so strict.

The army in Pakistan is, in fact, on the defensive after the Osama Bin Laden's death. The arrests of some CIA informers indicate that the force is facing relentless criticism that it failed on Osama, who was killed by the Americans in Pakistani territory. For the first time, the army has come out with a statement to point out that the attack on them was part of efforts to create division among important institutions.

This is an "unfortunate trend," the army says in a press release, and needs to be stopped because it is "detrimental to national interest." So exasperated is the army that it has even said it doesn't need the US aid, which should be diverted to economic developments. Chief of Army Staff General Parvez Kayani has said that in the last 10 years the army has been given only \$1.4 billion from the some \$8 billion aid received from the US.

Yet, the army has gone from strength to strength in defence as well as civil matters, and stays crucial to any breakthrough with India. Somehow, it is not convinced that a rapprochement with New Delhi can help Islamabad to face, if not retrieve, the situation within Pakistan. History will repeat itself if no lesson is learnt from it. By now, both India and Pakistan should have realised that and become at least decent neighbours.

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