

Draft broadcast policy

A retrogressive idea that must be shunned

THE world is moving towards openness and transparency, and opacity is being decried by all quarters. The operating word is the unfettered right of the people to know. At such a time our government, in its wisdom, has drafted a retrogressive, backward looking, outmoded and archaic national broadcasting policy that if pursued would put our clock of progress back by decades, if not more. We will dwell on some of the proposals.

For example, the proposed policy seeks to put public figures and political personalities beyond criticism, which no body can be. Not only should public figures be open to strict scrutiny, it is the duty of the media also to assess their performance and expose their shortcomings.

We feel that national ideology, national interest and indeed national security are matters that do not lend themselves to subjective interpretations of any particular authority. These are axiomatic and normative values recognized by all. Is it for the government to arrogate to itself the task of defining what our national interest is, or for that matter can issues of national security be confined to the interpretations of those that deal with it directly? And are the government and its agencies the sole guardian of our national security? It may so happen that the government may evolve policies that might impinge, unwittingly, on national interest. And media criticism, reflecting public opinion, helps the government to recast policies that serves national interest better.

The proposed fiat seeks to put a cap on the broadcast media to air programmes that might harm our relationship with a friendly country. What does the government mean by it? Are we to believe, for example, that we cannot air programmes that are critical of US policies even when it attacks other countries, or hold talk shows on Shia-Sunni killing in Pakistan or communal riots in India, or mistreatment of Muslims in UK, or human rights violations in Thailand?

Such policies are the last resort of a government that wants to hide its underperformance by stifling criticisms and dissent, which cannot work. These ideas are anathema to the Constitution, in spite of what some may claim, and abhorrent to democratic principles. The government must abjure this disastrous idea.

Attack on the Israeli Embassy

Egyptian frustration vented out?

THE recent attack on September 9, 2011 was the worst since Israel established its mission in Egypt, which was the first Arab country to sign a peace treaty with Israel in 1979. While we cannot in principle be supportive of any attack on a foreign embassy in any host country, interpretation of the incident goes on predictable lines.

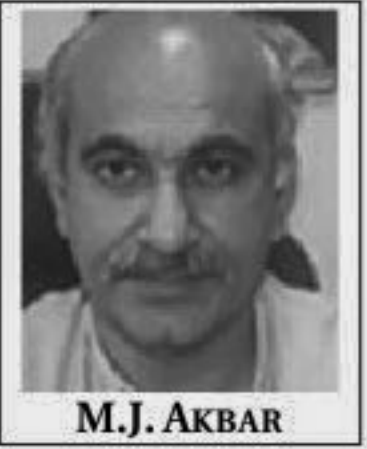
These anti-Israeli sentiments may have come as a surprise to Israel, who had become accustomed to the amicable relations it had for five decades under the Mubarak regime. The powerful security forces of the now ousted leader would never have allowed a protest to take place anywhere near the embassy.

The new military rulers in Egypt appear to be caught between a rock and a hard place. They are well aware that maintaining peaceful relations with Israel is vital not only for the geo-political balance of the region but also for the billions that it brings them in military aid. On the other hand, the over-friendly relationships with Israel will result in facing pressure from the Egyptian public. This is so because they demand an end to what they regard as too amicable a relationship under Mubarak.

Mubarak is perceived to have given in to the desires of Israel and the US instead of taking a stance in support of the Palestinian cause.

This situation clearly reflects on the overwhelming sentiments of Egyptians in the post-Mubarak era. Whereas under Mubarak's regime, these sentiments were well-contained and reserved for fear of persecution, now the Egyptian public, in a move to become more democratized, are expressing their veritable views on a key, sensitive issue and doing so with unleashed sentiment.

The Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu has expressed that he would like continued peace with Egypt



M.J. AKBAR

CALM down, everyone. Relax. Our invaluable Home Minister P. Chidambaram has finally found the answer to terrorism. Indeed, he did so on July 13, after the Mumbai blasts.

It isn't his fault if this magic prescription has not quite worked, and death has returned to Delhi. Nothing is ever his fault. And anyone who thinks otherwise has to be either a fool or an enemy agent (which means of course an agent of Jayalalithaa or BJP).

On July 13, Chidambaram explained that the blasts were not the "fault of intelligence agencies." They might have been to blame in those bad old days when the comb-loving Shivraj Patil (now condemned to life under chandeliers in some Raj Bhawan) was home minister of India. But no longer. These days the cops get intelligence every hour, every day. Maybe under Patil they got intelligence only every second hour, and never on weekends. But that slipshod era is over. It's all clockwork now.

So why haven't the terror attacks stopped? Why doesn't this torrent of intelligence include information of planned attacks? The infallible Chidambaram has the answer. It is because terrorists work "in a very clandestine manner." Eureka! Of course! Those dastardly cowards! How dare they remain clandestine! The

next time the Lahore-based chief of Lashkar e Taiba, or any extremist villain in India, gets ready with a bomb he should send a detailed letter to Chidambaram, preferably by courier since normal mail cannot be totally trusted.

And then, based on incontrovertible evidence, a pot-bellied policeman can trot off to the sites, defuse the

Chidambaram has been a brilliant lawyer, and no one believes that his IQ is inadequate for his present job. Why then does he make silly remarks? Does a crisis bring out the worst rather than the best in our ministers?

truth is that police are clueless and these images are planted on the front pages of newspapers to simulate a sense of urgency in the hunt that has absolutely no relationship with reality.

If police had a clue, the bombs would not have gone off. The justification is that the images are a composite of responses from survivors at the site of the attack. How does anyone in

fool. The luminaries of this government, most particularly Rahul Gandhi, got evidence of what the voter thinks when he was heckled during his courtesy visit to the hospital to meet victims.

Sadly, even as terrorists get more brazen police get more complacent. They know nothing will happen even if they do nothing. What has hap-

pened after the July Mumbai incidents apart from tokenism? But the knee-jerk motions continue after each outrage.

May I be permitted to publish an appeal on behalf of The Learned Society of Common Sense to our police officers? Please do not continue to indulge in that sorry hoax called a computer-generated likeness of suspects. The

truth is that police are clueless and these images are planted on the front pages of newspapers to simulate a sense of urgency in the hunt that has absolutely no relationship with reality.

If police had a clue, the bombs would not have gone off. The justification is that the images are a composite of responses from survivors at the site of the attack. How does anyone in

that unfortunate crowd know who placed the bomb? The terrorist put some distance between his weapon of destruction and himself or he would be dead too. The Delhi outrage was not the work of suicide bombers. Is there ever any eventual resemblance between these images and actual suspects, if any are discovered?

These images are more likely to be the outcome of imagination propelled by fear among the people and cynical prejudice on the part of the police. Check: these instant images will almost always be adorned with a beard. This is institutionalised communalism, and not very subtle either, against Muslims. Forty eight hours after the Delhi incident the home minister said that leads were promising but not very conclusive. As far as the public sentiment is concerned, however, judgement has already been passed.

A long face is obligatory when anyone in establishment, government or opposition, delivers a sermon on terrorism and advocates the need for a bipartisan offensive. The problem is not one of intention. That is good enough. The worry is that our police system is riddled with inefficiency, a fact that is not lost on those working so meticulously to damage India. The question that should give sleepless nights to Parliament is stark: has terrorism in India become risk-free?

The writer is Editor, *The Sunday Guardian*, published from Delhi, *India on Sunday*, published from London and Editorial Director, *India Today* and *Headlines Today*.

Manmohan visit and gnawing questions

SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

INDIAN Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's maiden visit to Bangladesh was accompanied with great fanfare and high expectations. For months, behind the scenes efforts were seemingly devoted on both sides of the border to tidy up several important and long awaited agreements. These agreements would not only have economic ramifications, but also political and relational ones.

Indeed this was a rare opportunity to open the doors, mend the fences, and reach out to one another. By doing so the two nations could come closer as partners in development, build a grand future from which to reap aplenty, and work towards a greater unity, at least in spirit. The anticipation was of a rare quality that there would be several momentous accords (water, power, transit, maritime boundaries), leading to heightened cooperation between the two nations with synergistic benefits distributed widely to the peoples of the two countries. Heaven knows, it could have even paved the way for others in the region to join in and gather the fruits of collective endeavour, eventually toning down the rivalries and animosities that have plagued them for decades and depressed development.

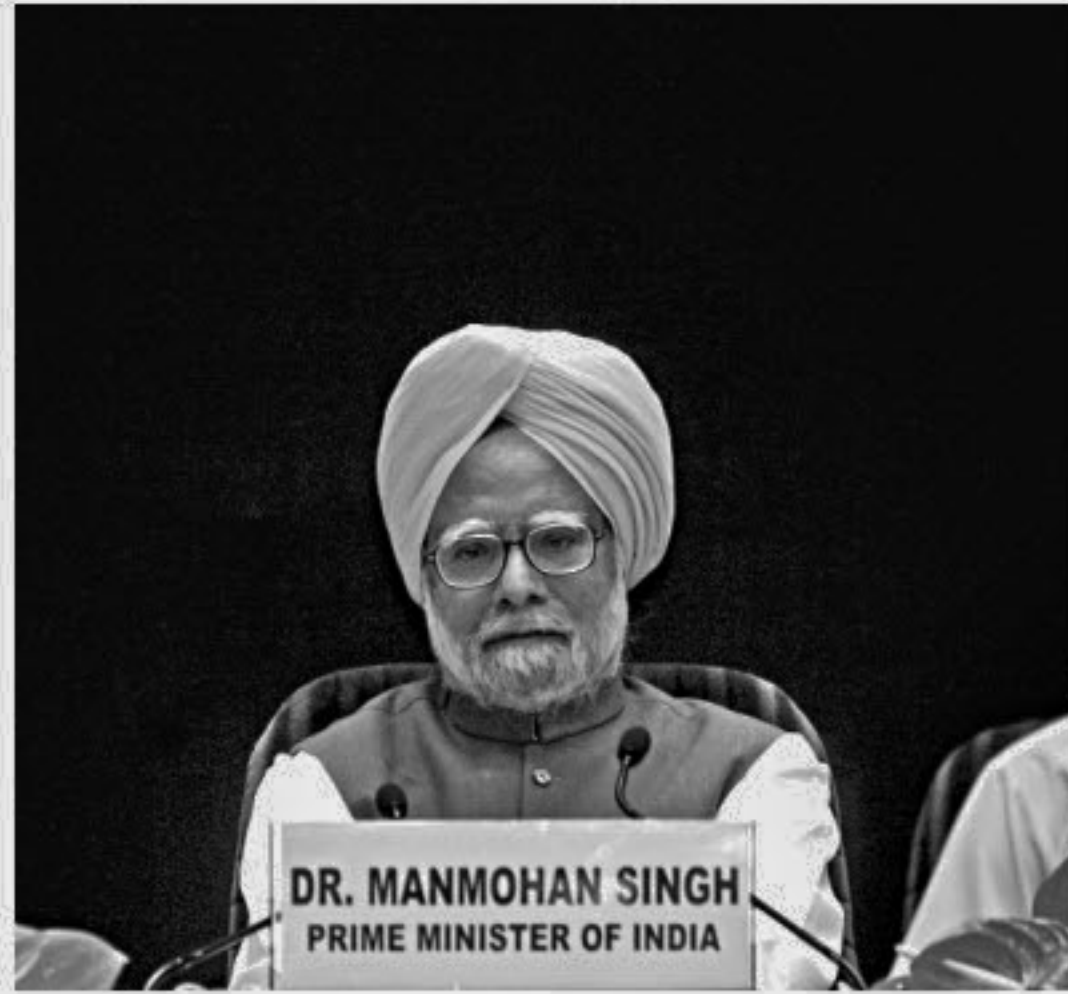
The morning headlines, sadly, told a different story, deflating all expectations: the major accords were being shelved. After months of shuttling by the emissaries, a few significant accords would surely be hailed as "harbingers of prosperity to both our countries," as the Indian PM expressed post hoc. The startling outcome of the summit leaves one wondering: "Is this the best we could really do?" Gowher Rizvi, Advisor to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, opined that "Bangladesh gained a lot." If expectations are contrasted with outcomes, most would say it was trifling. The advisor needs to do a better selling job!

One has a nauseating feeling that high expectations need to be tempered when it comes to how "subcontinentals" work with each other: often calculating, conniving, nervous, half-serious, with hidden agendas, and constantly looking backwards. Rare and unexpected are the moments of boldness and imagina-

tion in their leaders that usher in a groundswell of hope that we can rise together, commune together, and for once look out for each other.

Many questions also arise from this highly anticipated event-of-an-era turned into a non-event. Especially, to allow the event to fizzle out with such innocuous ending, with the entire region watching, how is this to be explained? Would this happen if the Indian PM was penning an accord with the Americans, the Europeans, or the Chinese? Could the behind-the-doors agreements be shelved with such abruptness and one-sidedness?

Also, how could the vaunted prime minister of India make such a significant trip unless the agreements were rock solid? Were we not going to witness a perfunctory signing ceremony with great flourish? And how could one loud squeak from Mamata



PHOTOS: AFP

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Banerjee, apparently well oiled, overturn the entire cart? If this was a domestic political issue, why was it not resolved internally before bringing it into the bilateral space?

A more intriguing question is whether Mamata's recalcitrance was a managed ploy in the context of national interests and power asymmetries. Analysts have repeatedly shown that the status quo favours India, where the current share of diverted river waters continues to

an accomplice in a deep finesse? But what about the transit issue: doesn't India stand to lose by having to shelve it too? Perhaps it does, but since the issue is still mired in substantial controversy, the Indians may have decided to scuttle it for the time being. From a comprehensive perspective, the cost-benefit best supported the status quo.

If one may surmise alternatively, did the centre or Trinamul have something to gain by discrediting the

other? By backing out so easily, citing Mamata's difficulties, was the centre's intention to discredit Mamata and her party for some long term objective? Or did the Trinamul Congress have an axe to grind with the centre, thereby creating the fiasco? Whatever these internal feuds, why was the Bangladesh summit used so blatantly? Was Bangladesh, thus, a mere pawn in the arcane power politics of India? Bangladesh's uncharacteristically subdued response to the sequence of events also bears reflection.

Whether India gains by maintaining the status quo or whether some internal political equation was played out, India did take a hit on the global stage. By trivialising the visit, India's posture and attitude, that it can change the rules of engagement willily nilly, was reinforced. The trust deficit that this will have created will likely take its toll in India's future negotiations with others, especially in the region.

As for the name Mamata, it signifies "motherly love" that seemed to be reserved only for her progeny (the people of Paschimbanga); others in her neighbourhood, she made very clear, would have none of it. This is quite contrary to her statement to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, upon becoming Chief Minister that "Both Bangladesh and West Bengal will flourish and we will work together in fostering ties between [us]." Are we to believe her words or her actions? Clearly her actions smack of deep self interest and disregard for a neighbour's needs. On this side of the border, Mamata is one mother and her love that will not be easily forgotten, unless she comes up with something spectacular, and very soon, to reveal her true intentions. One can only hope that Advisor Rizvi's comment: "Mamata is a very close friend of Bangladesh, she loves us..." will be vindicated.

In my conjectures there is a lesson: At this level of inter-governmental engagement, working towards a vision of the future, expectations must be managed far better and match outcomes. Otherwise questions will arise. And in trying to address the gaps, political aspirations of many may hang in the balance.

The writer teaches at Pennsylvania State University and is Editor, *Journal of Bangladesh Studies*.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 13

1943 Chiang Kai-shek elected President of the Republic of China.

1953 Nikita Khrushchev is appointed secretary-general of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

1971 Chairman Mao Zedong's second in command and successor Marshal Lin Biao flees after the failure of alleged coup against Mao.

1989 Largest anti-Apartheid march in South Africa, led by Desmond Tutu.

1993 Public unveiling of the Oslo Accords, an Israeli-Palestinian agreement initiated by Norway.

1993 Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin shakes hands with PLO chairman Yasser Arafat at the White House after signing an accord granting limited Palestinian autonomy.