

## Election under caretaker govt

*Having raised it in the rally, do so now in parliament*

MUCH of what Khaleda Zia said in day before yesterday's grand rally was expected. Given our political culture of mutual vilification, and name calling, her speech was a repetition of that practice. Predictably, and one with which we have sympathy, she demanded restoration of caretaker system for holding the next election and threatened non-participation if polls are held under party government.

Controversy about it had only crept in when a military-backed caretaker government extended the constitutionally stipulated three-month tenure of the interim government, taking it to two years and that too, under emergency rule. We have made it abundantly clear that we needn't have to throw the baby with the bath water. All we have to do is to bring an air-tight amendment to the constitution protecting the three-month tenure provision. If necessary, fine-tuning of the choice list and power balance between the president and the chief advisor to interim government could also be done.

It is worthwhile to note that the Supreme Court in its judgement allowed for continuation of caretaker system for next two terms.

From the Naya Paltan podium, for all the vitriol and bellicosity issuing, the strikingly redeeming feature was the absence of hartal call for the moment.

The opposition has announced three road marches from three of the six divisional headquarters spread over October. The government should allow these to happen unhindered as long as they are peaceful, which is a democratic right that cannot be impinged on. The opposition would do well to keep the public informed about the routes and the timings so that essential public movements can be re-routed and citizens' hardship minimised.

In her speech she made a mockery of the issue of religious extremism and consequent terrorism. We take severe exception to her stance. BNP and its leader must accept the fact the terrorism and extremism must be dealt with most severely, which was not done during its last stint in power. In fact, it was given indirect encouragement by denying its existence.

The BNP chief, by terming the war crimes trial as partisan, appears to have lent her support to those currently being tried. We find this stance disturbing and consider it as a trivialization of a fundamental demand of the people. Finding flaws with the process is one thing. But questioning the trial as a whole is something else

Finally, we would say to the opposition, now that you have raised the demand for having national elections under caretaker system on the street, you are obliged to raise it in the parliament to have your demand effectively met. However strong the opposition feelings may be, without taking recourse to parliament, the law to restore the caretaker system, which is the opposition's demand, cannot be fulfilled. So, go back to parliament and raise this demand there.

## New gas find

*Confidence in indigenous capacity enhanced*

THE discovery of 1 trillion cubic feet of natural gas at the Rashidpur gas field raises hope for addressing the energy crisis. This has been achieved at nearly half the cost of the international exploration companies.

This will significantly boost energy supply. According to Bangladesh Petroleum Exploration and Production, Ltd. (BAPEX), a subsidiary of Petrobangla, it will increase the total gas reserves past the 3 TCF mark. However, this will require investments in sophisticated equipment and infrastructure for extraction and utilisation.

The domestic demand for gas has outstripped supply due to rapid economic growth. As a result, the supply of gas to energy-based new factories had to be reduced. It should be noted also that the major portion of electricity is also fueled by gas.

This new find raises the hopes and the confidence in our indigenous capacity in the field. It provides encouragement and boosts the self-confidence of the mineralogists and engineers involved in the exploration of natural gas.

BAPEX had found gas previously and in some instances, lease was unfortunately given to non-indigenous organizations. This will hopefully not recur.

This news is welcome and a great relief because without the finding and tapping of new gas sources, the country would have depleted its domestic gas supply by 2015

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 29

1911

Italy declares war on the Ottoman Empire.

2008

Following the bankruptcies of Lehman Brothers and Washington Mutual, the Dow Jones Industrial Average falls 777.68 points, the largest single-day point loss in its history.

### STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



Brig Gen SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN ndc, psc (Retd)

THE lamentation was that of a very senior BNP party member on the day of the latest BNP called *hartal* at being hemmed in by the law enforcing agencies in front of the party office. That is the length of democracy that is circumscribing the space of the opposition parties. At least that is what the BNP thinks it is. And witnessing the plight and the police action on the day before and the day of *hartal*, one could hardly disagree.

The *hartal* came as a surprise because we were assured by the BNP that *hartal* was not an option they were going to consider very soon. But given the psyche of political parties, it could not pass up a chance to exploit a situation that apparently has the government on the back foot after a less than successful visit of the Indian PM. And on the heels of that, another issue was put on the opposition's platter, fuel price hike. There could not have been a better set of excuses for the BNP to call *hartal*.

And with equal zeal did the AL try to make us see the utter irrationality of the opposition's decision to call *hartal* when they themselves had, not very long ago, termed *hartal* as the birthright of the people, a means of political protest against all forms of government misdeeds, etc and etc.

The pithy comment describes the real state of democracy in Bangladesh -- all 18 inches of it. What was interesting to see was the anti-*hartal* procession all over the city under the protection of the law enforcing agencies. And where were those that had called the strike? They were confined within the premises of their party offices.

FERNANDO M. LUJAN

RETURNING home after 14 months in Afghanistan, I've sensed a growing gloom over the American war effort there. Many of the policy wonks, politicians and academics I encounter here seem resigned to failure.

While sipping their Starbucks, a few mutter the word "unwinnable." They speak in grim sound bites: A gunfight on the United States Embassy's doorstep. A helicopter shot out of the sky. But before people outside the Beltway accept this hardening conventional wisdom as fact, allow me to offer a different view.

I am an Army Special Forces officer by trade, and spent the past year leading a small team of Dari- and Pashto-speaking Americans whose mission was to embed with Afghan Army units. We went weeks wearing Afghan uniforms and sleeping at tiny outposts, eating local food and staying up late speaking with Afghan soldiers in their own languages. While I can't pretend to know the intricacies of Afghan-Pakistani politics (nor can most "experts" on the evening news), I can describe the truth on the ground.

The southern provinces of Kandahar and Helmand were ground zero for the 2010 Afghan surge and the area where we devoted the full weight of our resources and resolve. The headlines hide deeper trends in places where the Taliban until recently enjoyed uncontested rule. Riding around with Afghan soldiers from dozens of different units, we heard one message everywhere: "Last year we couldn't even move out of the front gate without being shot or blown up. Now we control as far as you can see."

And the civilian population is starting to stir in these newly reclaimed districts. In little-known places like Arghandab, Panjwai and Nad Ali, Afghans are moving back into their long-abandoned homes. Weekly tribal *shuras* -- like town hall meetings -- are beginning to flourish in areas where not even a handful of

The way the police acted the day before and on the day of *hartal* would give one the impression that there was a ban on political activity of the opposition. Nobody could have missed the pictures on the electronic media of processions being set upon by the police who gave the impression that they were there not to maintain law and order but to go

*hartal*. We are ashamed at the role of the police and we would hope that the PM and the saner elements in the ruling party are as much embarrassed by how the police have behaved.

However, we are happy to note that the matter has not escaped the notice of some parliamentarians. That is amply clear from the com-

*While the democratic space is being reduced because of lack of tolerance, the road to democracy in the middle is just being stretched out.*



after the opposition whenever they appeared on the streets. Neither was Sec 144 declared by the administration, nor curfew, yet we saw the police acting as if the opposition was breaking Sec 144 or violating curfew orders.

One could be forgiven for mistaking them for AL party cadres in uniform, their behaviour belied their role. And there were party cadres too out on the streets "preventing"

ments of the chairman parliamentary committee on law and order on the issue. The picture of a policeman stamping on a man's chest would have made any self-respecting administration to react and take the policeman to task. We have not heard of anything being done to him.

The rueful comment of the senior BNP leader says a lot about democracy in Bangladesh. The much vaunted democracy that we strug-

# This war can still be won



*"Winning" is a meaningless word in this type of war, but something is happening in the Afghan south that gives me hope. Rather than resignation, America should show resolve not to maintain a large troop presence or extend timelines, but to be smarter about the way we use our tapering resources to empower those Afghans willing to lead and serve.*

elders would attend a year ago, for fear of being assassinated. The Taliban are not standing idly by. Pushed out of many of their strongholds, they have shifted tactics, focusing on high-profile attacks on softer (usually civilian) targets. But we fail to see the subtleties at home.

In May, after one such attack in Kandahar, I joined some Afghan officers watching the local news coverage, expecting looped footage of explosions and chaos. We were all surprised to see four small children, their faces blurred, in an impromptu news conference. They recounted how the Taliban had given them candy and persuaded them to don suicide bomber vests by promising that they wouldn't die and that their impoverished families would be provided for.

Regardless of their political views, all Afghans regard children as off limits. That night, watching the children tell how they were recruited, the Afghan captain at my side, a tough Pashtun named Mahmoud, shrugged and said in Dari: "They're getting desperate."

But optimism in Afghanistan should not be mistaken for naivety. We've paid a terrible price for the gains we've made, and Afghans know we're leaving. Insurgents still control many areas and are certain to attempt a counteroffensive as foreign troops withdraw. My optimism is rooted instead in an intangible metric, gleaned from the thousand cups of tea we drank and the hundreds of patrols we walked: The Afghans have the will to win, with or without us.

gled for has been stifled and kept confined within the four walls of the parliament and within the premises of the office of the opposition political parties and in the duplicitous utterances of the senior leaders of the ruling party, and trampled under the boots of policemen.

But, unfortunately, that has been the trend ever since we rediscovered ourselves in 1991. Those who are talking so glibly now about 18 inches of democracy did not offer very much more to the opposition when in power. We have not forgotten the picture of the AL office being barricaded by the police and the AL leadership left to do all the shouting they could form inside.

However, the BNP rally went off without much ado although one has heard of complaints that difficulties were created for its supporters from outside of Dhaka reaching the meeting spot. And why was the Paltan not allowed for the purpose we don't know.

This is not really the type of democracy that we had wished for. Even the democratic institutions that can do something appear to be powerless. While we appreciate the remarks of the chairman of the Human Rights Commission on police behaviour, we hope he would do more than comment. His tears only betray his helplessness and make us feel so much more hapless.

There are many reasons why democracy has suffered in Bangladesh, but most of all because of the way we have treated our political opponents. While the democratic space is being reduced because of lack of tolerance, the road to democracy in the middle is just being stretched out, to quote an erudite reader. This means that we have to brace for another period of political uncertainty.

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There are still corrupt, lazy, incompetent senior officers in the ranks, clinging to positions they've bought or traded for. Yet for every one of them, I met five young, hungry soldiers eager to take up the fight. Men like Jawad, a brilliant 23-year-old intelligence officer, or Jamaluddin, a sergeant major who had revolutionised his entire battalion from within.

I watched them wake up early every morning to drive unarmoured Ford Rangers down some of the most dangerous roads in the world. They unfurl huge Afghan flags and fly them from every truck. I watched them run toward the sound of gunfire, despite often having only a Vietnam-era flak vest or less to protect them. These men are Uzbeks, Hazaras, Tajiks and, increasingly, Pashtuns -- former rivals now working together. They are the beginnings of a nation.

"Winning" is a meaningless word in this type of war, but something is happening in the Afghan south that gives me hope. Rather than resignation, America should show resolve not to maintain a large troop presence or extend timelines, but to be smarter about the way we use our tapering resources to empower those Afghans willing to lead and serve.

For all our technology and firepower, we will succeed or fail based on what happens after we bring our troops home. Young Afghans like Mahmoud, Jawad and Jamaluddin will be the ones to stay behind. Many of them lack education, training, equipment, even uniforms -- and they serve for years in dangerous postings with only the rarest opportunity to visit their families. But the best of them keep doing their jobs in the face of hardships we can't even imagine.

None of them accept failure as a foregone conclusion. Neither should we.

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