

Cabinet 'reshuffle'

Job cut out for time left

THE reshuffling of the cabinet by swapping of portfolios and inducting two new faces is a welcome move as it is indicative of acting under public pressure, though belatedly.

Clearly, this is a softening of an inexplicably stiff stance that the prime minister had earlier taken towards having anything to do with the inept and corrupt ministers.

The erstwhile communications minister Syed Abul Hossain who became the subject of the media and public criticism for the deplorable condition of the roads and highways and for allegations of corruption in the Padma Bridge project retains his position in the cabinet but with another portfolio. To some extent, sensitivity has also been shown to public criticisms against unbridled price hike by transferring Mohammad Faruk Khan from commerce to civil aviation and tourism ministry.

The induction of two new ministers in the cabinet is of special significance to us. Veteran parliamentarian Suranjit Sengupta has been given the charge of the newly created railway ministry, while Obaidul Kader has been made the new Communications minister.

The railways should have been made into a separate ministry early on because of its centrality to the communications sector. That this has been done now is judicious and commendable.

The question is how far the experienced parliamentarian will be able to deliver in the remaining two years in his hand and rescue such a vital sector of communications from its present state of neglect and backwardness.

As for the communications minister, the huge responsibility of bringing the Padma Bridge project back on track as well as improving the condition of the nation's road network lies with him.

Given the time left to the incumbents, they will have to be serious if they are to make a difference and the prime minister needs to give them a free hand to deliver on their portfolios. The public is watching.

Islamic parties on the rise

ME and North Africa hogging headlines again

THE rise of Islamic parties seems to be an outcome of early this year's Arab Spring and the fall of authoritarian regimes across North Africa. They have made a good showing in recent elections in Tunisia and Morocco, and the convincing victory of the Muslim Brotherhood followed by the hardline Al Nour bloc grabbing almost a quarter of the votes in the first round of Egypt's first parliamentary polls since the fall of Hosni Mubarak are noteworthy. A similar phenomenon may now be expected, not only in Libya, which is also rising on its feet following the toppling of the Qaddafi regime, but also in Yemen and Syria.

So far, victory lies with some groups based on the Turkish model, but fears of more hardline groups edging their way in are rife, with the US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton already warning that Islamist gains must not set back democracy in Egypt. But the people have only spoken against the totalitarian regime. While the phenomenon is seemingly new, its roots lie in years of autocratic rule in these countries which have failed to serve the people's needs, especially in the area of human rights and freedoms, and the Islamist parties, hitherto banned and persecuted, now seem the only promising alternative to the people who have toppled the despotic regimes.

Whether the moderate or hardline groups ultimately take and remain in power will determine the future of democracy not only in these countries but could also have repercussions across the world.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 8

1912 Leaders of the German Empire hold an Imperial War Council to discuss the possibility that war might break out.

1941 United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt declares December 7 to be "a date which will live in infamy", after which the US and the Republic of China declare war against Japan.

1953 United States President Dwight D. Eisenhower delivers his "Atoms for Peace" speech, and the US launches its "Atoms for Peace" programme that supplied equipment and information to schools, hospitals, and research institutions around the world.

1987 The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty is signed. Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev sign an historic agreement to reduce the size of their nuclear arsenals.

1991 The leaders of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine sign an agreement dissolving the Soviet Union and establishing the Commonwealth of Independent States.

2007 Benazir Bhutto, first and only female former Prime Minister of Pakistan, had her PPP Office stormed by unidentified gunmen. Three supporters are killed.

14

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



DECEMBER for us hold many momentous days that occupy our collective psyche everyday of the year. Some of these are literally laced with the blood of the people in their struggle for their rights. And some of these have lessons for us, which of course we all too often forget.

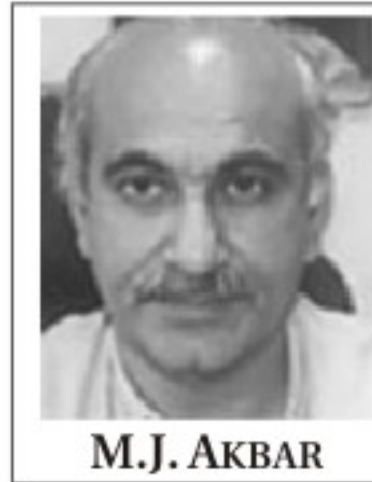
December 6 is one such day which has come and gone by without much notice. And that for me is agonising. The media (with some exceptions) and the political parties did little more than treat the day in a perfunctory manner. We seemed to have become oblivious of a day which witnessed the successful culmination of the collective effort of the people and the political parties, paving the way for revival of true democracy in the country after a very long time. Some of us, particularly those with selective amnesia may need reminding that democracy was abridged in Bangladesh well before the men in *khaki* decided to intervene in politics.

Reportedly, the celebrations that followed the departure of Ershad in 1990 were only surpassed by the celebrations of December 16, 1971. Regrettably, more than two decades later we can only lament for the dreams that remain unfulfilled and of the promises not kept.

Democracy received the first blow when the elected representatives in the parliament decided in their wisdom to choose a single party dispensation striking at the very essence of democracy. And for a good sixteen years since then, the country endured a pseudo-democratic rule hogged by the military, till the masses felt that enough was enough, and compelled the political groups to close ranks in toppling an unpopular autocratic regime.

Letting December 6 go by largely unnoticed is agonisingly also because, looking at the way things have turned out, the way democracy has been

BYLINE



secretary which Cabinet ministers take, very solemnly indeed, when being anointed to the highest level of government. Step 2: A ban on mobile phones during Cabinet meetings. Which of the two is more difficult? The first, since it is easier to amend the Constitution of India than change the ideological commitment of politicians to their self-image. Democracy has its demands.

The present Union Cabinet has made a total mockery of its obligation towards official secrecy. Some ministers do not even wait for the meeting to end before they begin to regale friends and journalists with gossipy details of what transpired; they sms. You have to be first off the block if you want to try and shape public opinion with your version of the story. In the old days, a leak was considered serious enough to constitute a scandal. The Cabinet no longer leaks; it gushes forth in monsoon torrents. If the prime minister is upset he has no opportunity to show it. Discipline is not a clause on the UPA's minimum or maximum programme.

There was word-by-word commentary, embellished with intricate details of what happened when, and who said what, during the Cabinet meeting that pushed through the decision to permit 51% foreign equity in multi-brand retail chains. We know precisely how Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee snubbed



We have forgotten too that confrontational politics with rigid positions and absence of mutual trust only create conditions for non-democratic forces to intervene and flaunt their relevance as saviour of the day. The situation such state of affairs brings about compel the general public to seek for alternatives to arrest the situation.

served by politics and vice-versa one needs no telling that we have failed to take advantage of the great opportunity that was offered to us or cared to draw any lesson from it. It is perhaps so because the leaders that were in the forefront of movement may have realised that it is because of their folly that the gains of the day could not be consolidated; they feel it prudent not to recall the day with much fervour or flourish because of the thoroughly unpolitical manner in which they chose to conduct politics, to hide their embarrassment.

However, for us the ordinary people, delving into it is necessary not only to

remind ourselves of what might have been but also to hold to account those whom we had chosen to represent us for failing the people.

The first lesson that we seem to have forgotten is the strength of a collective front to address national issues. If the anti-Ershad movement could make the political parties cut across party lines and join hands for one single purpose, one wonders why we have to remain fractured on national issues. And there are quite a few that confront us at this time where collective wisdom of the ruling and the opposition parties would have helped to determine a cogent policy.

We have forgotten too that parlia-

ment and politics cannot be decoupled, as we have seen happen due to boycott of the parliament, a practice that regrettably was introduced by the Awami League. The resulting dysfunctional democracy has only helped the fringe extremist elements to consolidate their positions in the political arena.

We have forgotten too that confrontational politics with rigid positions and absence of mutual trust only create conditions for non-democratic forces to intervene and flaunt their relevance as saviour of the day. The situation such state of affairs brings about compel the general public to seek for alternatives to arrest the situation. Change is not only sought, it is also welcomed, as we saw happen in the aftermath of October 2006 turmoil.

We seem to have forgotten too that non-democratic forces step in and perpetuate their presence because of the fractious political situation. It cannot be lost on the political leadership that if in the past the military ruled in the garb of democracy it was only because a segment of the polity connived with them. While it may be convenient to flog the civil society and accuse it of destroying the foundation of democracy, it will be well to keep in mind that some of the political parties had helped accord the military regimes legitimacy in some form or the other.

The code of conduct that the three alliances drew up in November 1990 was a remarkable document that truly reflected their commitment to a functional democracy based on principles and values and not expediency. And they threw it out of the window at the very first opportunity for narrow partisan interest.

Is it too much to ask of the political parties to sink their differences without compromising their principled stand to revive democracy once again, democracy that seems to exist only in name and not in substance? Can't we expect that, at least for the sake of Nur Hossain and Dr. Milan?

.....

The writer is Editor, Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

The 5-point political reform programme

his Bengal ally Dinesh Trivedi; how Trivedi stormed out and then stormed back after Kamal Nath's persuasive intervention. Jairam Ramesh's comment that the decision would cost Congress a few seats in Uttar Pradesh has been so accurately reported he might as well have issued a press release. Sharad Pawar's dismissive retort, that the Congress wasn't in good shape there in any case, got equal play

mous as MPs would not have to fly into Delhi. Collective behaviour would be instantly eliminated, thereby ending that common rush to the well which forces the Speaker to adjourn proceedings. We might even have a full session without disruption, and while that would be terrible for television, it might be good for legislation and debate. Some states have tried surreptitious reform by curtailing the length of sessions to an absolute minimum.

The Delhi Assembly met recently for just two days. A virtual Parliament would not need such unsavoury tactics. However, there should never be any restrictions on any MP attempting to visit Parliament for a cheap meal in the canteen. This is a fundamental right of MPs, and a cornerstone of Indian democracy. [The cornerstone of British democracy is the pub in Parliament, which is why its debates are more spirited.]

Fourth Reform: Allies should be denied, by law, any freedom of thought or expression once they had ensured that a new government had the requi-

site majority. This would remove the principal source of tension in coalitions. This is a vital reform, given the fact that we are going to have partnerships in power for at least the next decade. After its impressive 200-plus seats in 2009, Congress began to hallucinate about single-party rule, but even Congress leaders on a high no longer entertain such illusions. The BJP doesn't even think about it. The message from any prime minister to allies would be simple: Put up, or shut up.

Fifth [and last] Reform: Dr. Singh must permit 51% foreign direct investment in Parliament. This would immediately bring transparency and order into the Indian body politic. The purchase of Lok Sabha shares would be restricted to democracies, thereby removing any threat from China. If the Americans bought majority control of the Lok Sabha we could switch at once to a presidential form of government, turn large parts of the Rashtrapati Bhavan into respectable office space, and contain all the political drama necessary to sustain a proper media to primaries.

If the British took 51% of the shares, instead, they could start three pubs in Central Hall, which would certainly improve the mood of members. If the French took charge, they could ensure fast delivery of their Rafale fighter jets to the Indian Air Force. The only danger in this reform is that Rome or Athens might take control, turning India into Greece or Italy, but fortunately they no longer have the money.

.....

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