

SUNDAY POUCH

Unelected heads to district councils

A self-serving, undemocratic move

THE appointment by an executive order of administrators to 61 zila parishads is another step backward taken by this government. The incumbents are all Awami Leaguers giving a clear signal of partisanship topped up by a policy of appeasement and placing party leaders in strategic positions, an impression that is difficult to shake off.

Materially, the appointments impinge on provisions 59 and 152 of the Constitution which spell out that the zila parishads will have to be constituted by elected persons. According to the Act of 1988 the upazila parishad would have been elected through votes from the elected office-bearers of pourashava, corporation, upazila and union parishads. In 2000 the AL government repealed the Act providing for direct elections to the district councils.

The appointments also violate Justice Shahabuddin's ruling in the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court in 1992. It had ordered elections to all the local bodies including the zila parishads within six months of the gazette notification of the verdict. But for years no elections have been held to the zila parishads.

So the induction of unelected chiefs in the zila parishads can only weaken the local government system even more than the fragile state it has been pushed into since the AL came to power. The upazila parishad chairmen are left disempowered by the binding advisory role of MPs. Now unelected administrators are being placed above the elected upazilas, another blow to them. In addition, the unelected upazila parishads may have preponderance over, or at least a conflicting relationship with, the pourashava chairmen and the deputy commissioners.

Just how could such an important move having serious constitutional and local body implications be made without engaging parliamentary stakeholders and experts in any kind of consultation, defies our comprehension.

Now it is incumbent for the government to give a specific roadmap in consultation with EC for expeditiously arranging elections to all district councils including those for the hill districts. Otherwise, it will go down as just another of the government's hypocritical decisions boding ill for democracy.

Another unspeakable case of brutality

Only deterrent punishment can help

THE appalling case of yet another sadistic husband maiming his wife because she wanted to continue her education gives an eerie feeling of unease. It was only last June that we were dumbfounded by the gory attack, by her husband, on Rumana Majid, a Dhaka University teacher. Now 21-year-old Jui, a college student, has had her right hand severed by her husband while being blindfolded and gagged just because she wanted to continue her studies, despite his objections.

The frequency of such crime indicates that male chauvinism has mutated into a dangerous psychosis that escalates domestic violence to such levels. Men beating their wives or even killing them is an age-old evil in society. It is only recently that it has become a punishable crime. But these examples indicate a growing intolerance of women being empowered as well as a sense of insecurity in these men that trigger such brutal acts. Let us admit to ourselves that these are not isolated incidents. They are happening all over the country and women's lives are cut short or their futures mutilated at the hands of cruel, cowardly, selfish husbands.

Laws already exist to try and punish such culprits. But we do not hear too much about such punishment being carried out. Domestic violence is still considered a family matter, a way to avoid the uncomfortable truth of violence within the home. The Domestic Violence Act, passed in 2010, is still not being implemented as effectively as it should be because of lack of awareness.

Is this a spreading psychosis perpetuated by the liberty many men enjoy in our society that allows them to assault and maim their wives whenever their egos are bruised? We need greater public condemnation of such barbarism. If we really want our women to be empowered individuals, they must be allowed to develop themselves intellectually without the fear of being

Mission accomplished in Iraq! Er... what mission?



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

LAST week, US President Barack Obama announced that the last US soldier will leave Iraq this December. He has, therefore,

kept his electoral promise to be out of Iraq. He said: "After nearly nine years, our war in Iraq ends this month."

Recall how the previous US President George Bush Jr. had imposed a war on the Iraqi people with a promise to "shock and awe" them and hunt down President Saddam Hossain to uncover the "weapons of mass destruction" which he was reported to be hiding. What ensued was carnage, a perfidy and countless woes. He called it "mission accomplished."

It would be appropriate now when US troops leave Iraq to make a quick audit of the US military presence in Iraq since 2003. There were at one time more than 170,000 US troops stationed in that country. According to the Pentagon, the war cost the US more than \$800 billion. But scholars say that the ultimate cost could rise to \$3 trillion. More than 4,500 US troops died there with tens of thousands injured. The Iraqi deaths were more than 100,000 including civilians and security personnel. But the human suffering there included millions wounded or forced to leave their homes.

The US could not find any "weapon of mass destruction" in Iraq. They could only hunt down Saddam Hossain hiding in a manhole, incarcerated him, checked his dental profile, put him on trial and had a Iraqi court hang him.

So why did the US go to such lengths? What was the reason behind this "mother of all battles?" What indeed was "the mission" of the US in Iraq?

President Obama, even before he was elected, had realised that this military engagement was turning out to be a disaster. He surmised that it was imperative to cut US losses before it blew out of all proportions. The

campaign was an ill-conceived, ill-planned show of force by a superpower. So when he was a junior senator from Illinois he espoused the cause of pulling out from this war. The American people soon elected him as their president to carry out the mandate to end the war and pull out US troops honourably from Iraq.

Now that the US troops are leaving, how is Iraq doing?

The country remains "visibly scared and struggling to regain a sense of normalcy, let alone its once prominent stature in the Arab world."

There is no doubt that Iraq through stumbling steps has edged towards being a democratic country. The elected Prime Minister Noori Al-Maliki, a Shia Muslim, is in the driving seat. A parliament guides the legislative agenda. But the society remains highly fractured. News

tear the country apart.

One major apprehension is that the Sunnis in Iraq, of whom many are tribesmen, are yet to be fully integrated into the mainstream of society. They were the ones who at one stage confronted the "al Qaeda Mesopotamia" and were able to give this militant group a run for their money. The Sunnis therefore expect more voice in the government and receive economic gains. The government however denies that the Sunnis are being ignored. The Kurdish problem remains a thorn in the side of Iraq also.

The period of military occupation of Iraq by US troops will be a subject of interest to scholars for many years. They will be interested to know why the US after spending billions of dollars had to leave behind a battered Iraqi economy. In spite of such

With him gone there is little possibility of regional conflicts spurred by Iraq's ambitions taking place. The US will not have to look over its shoulders for a long time there.

In the end, many say the US was in Iraq for control of its oil. With oil comes money. The US policy some say was to follow the money. But was this the real intention of US in Iraq? One does not yet know the extent US has its fingers over the Iraqi oil spigot. But the impression still lingers. There is also another nagging question of several billion dollars of oil money which belongs to Iraq but has gone missing. Questions are being raised in many circles. But answers are yet to be found.

The US military occupation of Iraq is not an isolated instance in its history. In the past it had taken such actions against other countries in order to serve its own interests or even to show off its strength. When a country is very powerful it tends to do so. As early as 1819, the US bullied Spain, which was then powerless, and booted it out of Florida. The US took Arizona, Texas and California from the Mexicans. After the 1898 Treaty of Paris and after the Platt Amendment passed by the US Congress in 1910, the US not only forced Cuba to incorporate the Platt Amendment into Cuba's constitution but also established the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay and in the Philippines.

Of course, in Iraq the US did not entertain any such idea of taking over. Perhaps it was keen to show off its reach and bite in a unipolar world. Also, there was Saddam who was menacing the whole region and threatening lesser countries.

So as the US leaves Iraq now, the country has to be rebuilt by the people. In a way they have a fresh opportunity. Let us see how well the Iraqi people who were the first builders of civilisation, in fact "the cradle of civilisation," do it again. We can only wish them well.

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reports tell us that there are huge traffic jams in Baghdad and in other cities because cars have to wait to pass through innumerable checkpoints. Iraq is still ridden by assassinations, roadside bombings triggered by improvised devices and widespread violence. On top of this the government is highly authoritarian.

The moot question now is whether the Iraqi people are happy with the US withdrawal in the midst of an unraveling political and security situation. There is a mixed reaction. Many think that Iraqis will now be the masters of their country. But the dominant emotion is apprehension. There are several fears that grip the people in the street. They feel that as US leaves, violence could resume, the Iraqi economy would continue to stagnate and separatist forces could

gargantuan expenditures Iraqis do not have regular access to clean water, good hospitals, safe and smooth roads and adequate electricity.

Unemployment in Iraq, according to some estimates, is a whopping 30% of the population.

Oil remains the cash cow of Iraq. The government however, through its sincere efforts, has restored much of the war damaged oil infrastructure. Oil is again being pumped, transported and exported abroad. This is bringing in the much needed revenues to the state coffers. But with the withdrawal of US forces there could be serious security challenges for the oil industry. Again there is uncertainty plaguing this vital sector.

One area where the US can rightly take credit is establishing regional security. Iraq under Saddam was a constant headache for its neighbours.

Russia's accession to the WTO

ABDUR CHOWDHURY

JOINING the World Trade Organization (WTO) next year crowns a long period of transformation for Russia which first applied for membership in June 1993. To win WTO entry, Russia has had to overhaul its national laws to bring them into conformity with the global trade regime as well as work out bilateral market-opening deals with all the members of the body. Russia has agreed to slash tariffs, get rid of industrial subsidies, and allow foreign companies greater access to its domestic market. The most important concessions offered by Russia are in market access for foreign service sector companies and banks, which were eagerly sought by European Union states.

WTO membership will offer Russia some of the tools to rebalance its economy, which relies heavily upon selling the nation's oil. As a major oil exporter, over 50 percent of its foreign trade is already tariff free. However, the metallurgy and chemicals industries stand to gain from increased market access and protection from antidumping measures. In time, other industries will benefit from restructuring and increased productivity stimulated by increased competition.

Russia needs foreign capital in order to affect its modernization and is aware of the need to project a more positive investment image. The largest gains from WTO membership will come from increased foreign investment in the Russian market for

services. Clearly, WTO membership alone will not convince cautious investors, but opening the Russian economy to international practices can only have positive benefits for the business climate. The Russians stand to benefit from the WTO entry, not just because they will get access to cheaper goods, but also due to the fact that the emerging infrastructure is to be created to support local industries. Russia's membership in the WTO will mean a more predictable trade market in Russia which is very important given the conditions of the current global

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financial crisis.

Yet it presents challenges too. While membership promises increased market access for Russian exports, Moscow will have to open Russia to foreign imports. Agreements will need to be implemented as a means to attract investment, stimulate trade and increase competition.

The challenges of membership are not limited to economic policy; they also undermine the political model that has come to define Russia since 2000. Under Putin, Russian citizens accepted reduced political freedoms in exchange for stability and

economic growth. Within the WTO, Moscow will have fewer means to support inefficient industries against competition from abroad. This could cause problems for many towns which rely on one factory or industry for jobs and public utilities.

In the short run, reducing tariffs and other protective measures for import-sensitive industries such as autos and aircraft and opening up key financial service industries banking and insurance to foreign competition could lead to the loss of jobs in those areas and the need for the Russian government to provide

unemployment insurance and other adjustment assistance. However, globally competitive industries, such as the raw material producers, could see markets abroad opening up and an increase in foreign investment as accession forces Russia to restructure its economy. In the long run, evidence from economies that have gone through similar transitions suggest that trade liberalization will lead to a more efficient Russian economy and to raising the living standard of the average Russian citizen. New industries will probably emerge over time helping to diversify

the Russian economy.

Russia is the largest and most populous country that had not been a member of the WTO. Russia's accession would significantly expand the geographical coverage of WTO rules to all major economies leading to a larger degree of stability and transparency to the international trading system. At the same time, Russia's entry into the WTO would continue a trend in which as the membership of the WTO becomes larger and more diverse, it becomes more difficult for that membership to reach a consensus on important issues. In addition, trade disputes between Russia and its trading partners will be brought to the WTO for resolution rather than addressed bilaterally, adding to the ever growing caseload of the WTO.

Still, to become a truly open economy, Russia will need to use WTO membership as a springboard for wider economic change. It is Putin who will face the tough realities of implementing WTO commitments, leading an elite that has long favored protectionism and subsidy over serious reform. However, the long-term benefits of membership should outweigh the initial costs. Russia will first have to make courageous decisions on which industries are truly sustainable and take measures to protect the population from the costs of adjustment.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 18

1956

Japan joins the United Nations.

1916

World War I: The Battle of Verdun ends when German forces under Chief of Staff Erich Von Falkenhayn are defeated by the French and British, and suffer 337,000 casualties.

1972

Vietnam War: President Richard Nixon announces that the United States will engage North Vietnam in Operation Linebacker II.

1989

The European Community and the Soviet Union sign an agreement on trade and commercial and economic cooperation.