

GROUND REALITIES

Asif Zardari's Pakistan

President's initiative for dialogue

It should be inclusive of CTG agenda

THE President and his office should not normally be dragged into a political dialogue, especially in our country, where the atmosphere is so acrimonious. However, the government appears to have done it and the President has agreed to launch it, and already letters of invitation have gone to JSD and JP. We think the President should have set some conditions, especially of preparatory nature, before agreeing to it.

However, the move can be seen as a potential ice-breaker between the hitherto non-communicating contending political parties to come to grips with issues central to holding free and fair elections. Besides, it will have a bearing by way of defusing political tension building up to a show-down pitch. More to the point, the initiative throws open a door for a wider dialogue to include the caretaker government agenda, the chief bone of contention between the ruling AL and the opposition BNP.

Whilst the reconstitution of the EC is a pressing issue and a vital one, we need to mainstream the caretaker government issue for the dialogue to be inclusive, pragmatic and productive. There is no reason why the presidential dialogue which we look upon as a mediation bid should not begin with an assurance of revisiting the caretaker issue in a spirit of accommodation. Since the opposition is looking for a clear declaration of intent on the caretaker issue, this should be forthcoming from the ruling party.

The Prime Minister is on record having said quite a few times that should the opposition have any specific formula on the caretaker system they should present it before the parliament. She would be open to considering it. Of course, it would have been the best if they had presented it before the parliament, but we believe the presidential dialogue offers a right platform, too.

Most importantly, the Supreme Court verdict underpins the ruling party's commitment in the sense that it has allowed for holding the next two general elections under the interim caretaker system.

When the president is involved in a political process, it is the option of last resort taken. So adequate preparations should precede the dialogue. We have no indication whether any preparatory communication has taken place, or any attempt was at all made towards that end. While we welcome this dialogue idea we must raise serious concerns that without adequate preparation the dialogue may not succeed, and the President's person and his office may be exposed to the danger of being dragged into political controversy.

Protection for the winter affected people

Have shelter homes for the ultrapoor

THE sweeping cold wave lingering since the last week is causing immense suffering to people all over the country, especially in the northern and southern districts with children and older people becoming the worst victims. Already seven new born babies died of cold-related complications in Rangpur. As the Met office forecasts a continuation of the spell, there may be more to be fatally affected unless the most vulnerable groups are immediately attended to and cared for.

The persistent spell as well as disrupting economic activities has hindered communications owing to dense fog. But most of all, it has rendered the poor village people largely unguarded against the biting cold. Conditions of slum dwellers and floating, homeless people in cities are particularly vulnerable because they are directly exposed to cold.

A contingency plan should have been handy with the government to protect the extreme poor and destitute against cold waves by providing them with warm clothes. More important is the need for arranging make-shift shelters for them like we cater for during floods and other natural disasters. Special emphasis should be placed on northern districts such as Rangpur and Dinajpur.

Treatment facilities for winter-induced diseases are also inadequate. Children's death in Rangpur has also brought to light the poor logistics that RMCH is provided with. Only three of the fourteen incubators for the paediatrics wards were in order, which explains why none of the victims could be saved. So, healthcare facilities in government hospitals



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

ASIF Ali Zardari has made it clear, or so he thinks, that there is nothing in the Constitution of Pakistan that can remove him

from the presidency of the country. He is, so he suggests, in firm command of his physical as well as mental faculties and therefore there is absolutely no ground for him to be pushed aside from his position as head of state. His political opponents, among whom is the country's powerful army, believe otherwise. Under Article 47 of the Constitution, they point out there is a good case for Zardari's removal from the presidency. Without anyone having to spell it out, President Zardari's complicity in what has come to be known as "memogate" is a strong reason why his judgement as head of state has come into question.

Pakistan's ambassador to Washington, Hussain Haqqani, has already left his post, to be replaced by the glamorous former information minister and Benazir Benazir loyalist Sherry Rehman. Haqqani is the man who sent off that memo to a senior American military official, soliciting guarantees that Washington would not allow the Pakistan army to stage a coup in the wake of the alleged May US assault which left Osama bin Laden killed in Abbotabad. Alleged because there are tens of thousands of people in Pakistan and across the Muslim world who do not believe that Laden was killed this year. Their surmise is that he died long ago, somewhere among Afghanistan's Tora Bora mountains, and that the Americans simply kept up a ruse of the man's being alive in order to claim greater glory for themselves at a moment of their choosing.

Whatever it was, it is now clear that Zardari and Haqqani did a sordid job of asking the US to make sure their army, which has seized power as many as four times in the past, did nothing that would push the president from office. Haqqani's resignation was clearly a result of the pressure the military had been bringing on the president to have him removed. For his part, Zardari succumbed easily and indeed was quick to try giving the impression that he

had had nothing to do with Haqqani's memo to Mike Mullen. But whether he can yet weather the storm, which keeps swirling across Pakistan, is a question few people find hard to answer. For them, Zardari is a doomed man.

Besides, with an army like Pakistan's, which in the past has not flinched from subverting the results of a general election, as in March 1971 when it refused to transfer power to the duly elected Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and has seen nothing wrong in overthrowing an elected government, as in July 1977 when it staged a

made it plain to Ms. Bhutto that her husband would have to be relieved of his responsibilities as investment minister. Note the irony: at a time when Pakistanis were describing Zardari as Mr. Ten Per Cent and even as Mr. Forty Per Cent, he was merrily serving as investment minister in his wife's government. And Ms. Bhutto refused to believe that Zardari could be a corrupt man.

In the event, Zardari paid the price soon after Leghari dismissed Benazir Bhutto's government. He served time in prison under both the Nawaz Sharif and Pervez Musharraf governments.



Asif Ali Zardari is not a man Pakistanis have loved. His only claim to politics and political authority has been his marital links with the Bhutto family.

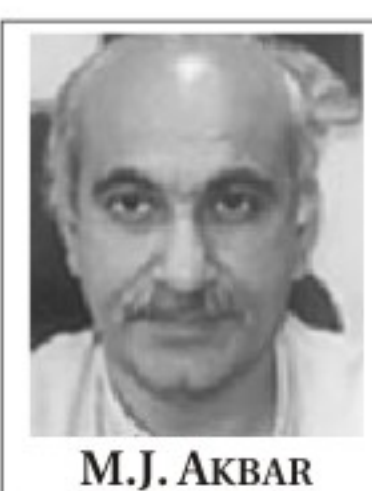
coup against the Zulfikar Ali Bhutto dispensation just as the latter was busy finalising a deal with the agitating Pakistan National Alliance, Pakistanis have never seen their military to be in need of a constitutional stipulation to remove their elected, albeit flawed leaders.

The bigger truth, though, is that a man like Zardari is there as Pakistan's president at all. There was a time when President Farooq Leghari, himself a Pakistan People's Party man and briefly foreign minister under Benazir Bhutto in her second administration,

In the West, reports of his and wife's profligate corruption abounded. A mansion in Surrey, bought by the Zardaris through questionable means, raised all the proper questions. To her discredit, Benazir Bhutto professed ignorance about how the home had been bought.

Asif Ali Zardari is not a man Pakistanis have loved. His only claim to politics and political authority has been his marital links with the Bhutto family. He is despised by the army, which will lose little chance of pouncing on him and seeing him pay the

BYLINE



M.J. AKBAR

YOU can create a Lokpal, but how do you change India? Anna Hazare's movement has been among the most important

developments since Jayaprakash Narayan's stirring leadership in the 1970s marked the second phase of that long historic process known as minting a nation out of a country. Anna's breathtaking contribution is that he has forced us to recognise that there is cancer in the body politic and that it is entering a terminal stage. He has withstood threat, pressure and inducement, including temptations aimed toward both ego and bank balance. He has insisted with courage and conviction that we find a doctor and fund a hospital that will begin to address this national disease. Both are essential, since there can be no forward movement until we identify and institutionalise those who can heal the patient. But diagnosis, however brilliant, is not a cure; it is only the beginning of a process. The next step, if anything, is harder.

Cosmetic change will disguise the virulent symptoms, but it will not eradicate the crisis. Now that the draft legislation has reached Parliament's drawing board, it is perhaps time to consider what precisely it might deliver. We need a Lokpal because the

present inter-relation between crime and punishment has collapsed. Crime has been delinked from punishment with grease. There must therefore be a Lokpal Bureau of Investigation (LBI) since a general without a force will only chase butterflies, not criminals. That is obvious. Then comes the difficult part.

Where will this new police force emerge from? As presently envisaged, it can only come from the existing guardians of law and order. No one

expects Anna Hazare to raise a new contingent of Indians who will, when they graduate from St. Divine School of Honesty, be awarded angelic wings under their armpits instead of hair. Question: why should the chaps who created the problem in the first place become any better as caretakers of the solution? The merit of the LBI concept is that it will be dedicated to fighting graft. What if, within five years, it merely raises the price of grease, and the cost of corruption becomes a higher quotient in the algebra of business balance sheets?

I am not a sceptic. I do not subscribe to the pessimist position that since nothing will happen, it is safer

to do nothing. Anna Hazare, in any case, has eliminated "nothing" from the options before the Indian state, and for this he deserves our adulation and admiration. There were muscular segments of this government, and their cohorts in the other estates, including media, who thought they could leak some acid on the Anna parade, and it would scatter. Wiser counsel prevailed; a sage or two currently ranked higher than the muscle party, recognised that any more acid

would only inflame crowds and incite conflagration across the country. But as we attempt to change course and steer back towards sanity, it is necessary to lift curtains from the grey areas, recognise doubt and try to shift it towards clarity.

Such a process cannot ignore contradictions on the street. Urban India, the first stronghold of the Anna movement, has collaborated in an alibi narrative of corruption which soothes the growing middle class need for blame without the pain of accountability. Corruption, in this comforting scenario, is the exclusive fief of the powerful: police, politician, businessman, bureaucrat. The alibi works because it is a substantial part of the

price of his sins. But, again, Pakistan's army has never respected politicians. If you go by Ayub Khan's memoirs, Friends Not Masters, you will have a fairly accurate idea of the lust for power that was beginning to develop within the military, the reality of which dawned on Pakistan in October 1958 when Iskandar Mirza and Ayub Khan simply seized the state. It was, in Justice Kayani's memorable phrase, a rare instance in history when an army had occupied its own country.

Today it is another Kayani, the present army chief, who tells anyone who will listen that Haqqani's memo had been at attempt at humiliating the Pakistan army. General Ashfaq Kayani does not mention Zardari, but that he and his fellow soldiers hold the president in deep contempt has never been a secret. In that, they only happen to be reflecting the sentiments of large swathes of Pakistanis, for whom Zardari remains symbolic of corruption, a man whose occupancy of the presidency undermines the dignity of the office.

Pakistan's trauma is not merely that it has Zardari for president. It is also that it is now home to both Taliban militants and American dogooders who have absolutely no qualms about intruding into Pakistani territory and engaging in military action in clear defiance of international laws. The Pakistani state teeters on the brink of collapse. Its army, responsible for nearly everything that has gone wrong with it since its creation, is today humiliated by the Taliban and the Americans killing its men in sorties it has little defence against. Its politics, always tenuous and feudal, does not look about to go through a qualitative change for the better.

And yet Pakistan's collapse is not what people in it and around it would wish to see happen. For that would cause instability running through the South Asian region as a whole. That certainly does not mean that Zardari must stay on. There are other men, waiting in the wings, Pakistanis could opt for. Imran Khan has not been much of a politician, but his performance of late has impressed Pakistan watchers abroad. But that is also what people said about Air Marshal Asghar Khan a long time ago.

The writer is Executive Editor, *The Daily Star*. E-mail: bahsantareq@yahoo.co.uk

Waiting for LBI

Culture is the aggregation of moral snowflakes. They might seem individually insubstantial, but when they congeal into ice a nation can become snowbound.

truth, but it is not the whole truth. There are men and women in government who are honest; and their numbers are not insignificant. The debate about 2G pricing became a debate only because there were officers in the finance ministry who refused to be coerced, and left an imprint of integrity on the files.

At the other end of the spectrum lies a different reality. The urban street, which considers itself a victim, and is proud of a vanguard role in any protest, leaps to take advantage of the culture of corruption whenever it gets a chance to make a personal side deal. It will not, for instance, pay a fine when it breaks the law; it will bargain with a constable for a corruption rate of escape. There is a story going around in Delhi, which is funny without being a joke. Traffic police are now demanding Rs.200 as bribe for a violation instead of Rs.50, and calling it the Anna Hazare rate. Such cynicism would not survive a day if the holier-than-thou driver of the car decided to pay the fine of Rs.500 instead. It takes two sides to complete a transaction.

Do not dismiss this as petty crime. Culture is the aggregation of moral snowflakes. They might seem individually insubstantial, but when they congeal into ice a nation can become snowbound.

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*.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 21

1832 EgyptianOttoman War: Egyptian forces decisively defeat Ottoman troops at the Battle of Konya.

1969 The United Nations adopts the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

1973 The Geneva Conference on the Arab-Israeli conflict opens.

1979 Lancaster House Agreement: An independence agreement for Rhodesia is signed in London by Lord Carrington, Sir Ian Gilmour, Robert Mugabe, Joshua Nkomo, Bishop Abel Muzorewa and S.C. Mundawarara.

1995 The city of Bethlehem passes from Israeli to Palestinian control.