

## Fake driving licenses

### Correct the systemic disorder

THE communications minister should not at all be surprised to find that of the four drivers he checked the licenses of, three had fake license and the fourth was not authorised to drive heavy vehicles at all.

We thank the minister for his efforts to get things straight. But, while it is all very good for him to be checking driving licenses of drivers on the roads the effect is at best symbolic and, on the road in the public eye, may look dramatic, but not quite what he and we all are looking for.

For the real effect we feel the minister should go for systemic mend. He must get into the system of not only issuance of driving license but also of conducting fitness of vehicles and issues of route permit as well. The problem is that the racket issuing fake licenses has not only thrown the BRTA out of the loop but has helped keep the drivers out of the legal process as well.

When a driver with an inauthentic license commits an accident he remains untraceable since the particulars on the license are fake, thus subverting the legal process. And for all that one can tell he obtains another license, courtesy the racket. An equally more unacceptable consequence is the fact that this deprives the state of huge revenue every year.

The fact that between 60 and 70 percent of the drivers on the roads drive with fake license is nothing new. And this newspaper has been consistently highlighting the seriousness of the matter. And it is deep anguish we note that there has been no concrete action on the part of the governments to address the problem.

The imperative therefore is to get into the system. While it is common knowledge that majority of the driving licenses are fake, that is not to say that drivers holding phony licenses are unfit to drive A drive should be conducted to find out the fake license holders, who should be given genuine documents after putting them through the necessary tests. This will not only legalise the drivers having adequate skills and driving experience but would also cull the unfit ones, apart from making BRTA relevant.

## Iran's talks offer

### A move that should ensure results

THE news that Iran and six of the world's major powers will engage in talks on Tehran's nuclear programme is certainly welcome. And it is so especially because of the worrying manner in which the temperature has gone up in recent times, both in Iran and in the West, owing to the increasing levels of intransigence on both sides.

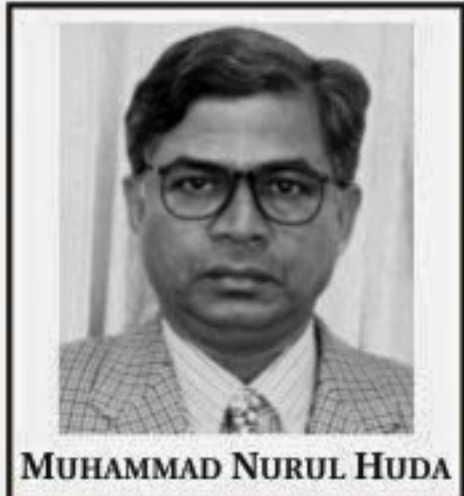
The Iranians have consistently let it be known that their nuclear programme is geared to peaceful purposes, an assertion the West, especially Washington, has always questioned. Add to that the fiery rhetoric President Ahmadinejad has employed in his denunciations of American policy around the world. For their part, die-hards in Washington have not made things any easier by their sabre-rattling against Iran.

Now that the European Union's foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, has responded positively to a message from Iran on the subject of the talks beginning again, there is reason for cautious hope here. President Obama's relief is palpable, given the fact that his administration inherited two wars from his predecessor's and is therefore quite unwilling to add a third one to the list.

Despite what President Obama said a few days ago, in relation to the Iran nuclear issue, about not bluffing on a possible US response to Iran's 'threat', he now sees a diplomatic chance to defuse the crisis. The drums of war, as he sees the situation, will quieten.

That certainly is the expectation. Both sides now need to go into the talks without preconditions. One appreciates the Iranian decision to ask for the talks, a move it would like to present as proof of its peaceful intentions. That is something one cannot quite say about Israel, whose threat to strike Iran's nuclear facilities is one the US and the EU must make sure does not materialise. The truth is that today it is not Iran but Israel which remains a

### STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE political opposition's intended "March to Dhaka" on March 12 and a grand assembly thereafter cannot be considered a policy, far less a strategy. At best it could be termed as a significant posture that appears to be more tactical. We may be witnessing good street politics but the same is not at all conducive to the quality or the sustainability of parliamentary democracy or the promotion of good governance.

As of now, the opposition speaks the language of the street. It threatens of a one-point programme to oust the government from power by forcing it to resign and to call a premature poll. Such an agitation has no political legitimacy behind it. There is no record of a government in Bangladesh or anywhere else having to relinquish power because of power failure or because of corruption and police brutality.

Sensible citizens would recognise that the situation today in Bangladesh on all the three aforementioned areas is not satisfactory and that it is largely the responsibility of the government to improve the situation. The incumbent government has to resolve the other long-festering problems of mal-governance. However, it is in the nature of democratic politics that an elected government be given five years to prove its worth.

To attempt to unseat an elected government before its five years are up, no matter how unsatisfactory its performance, reflects impatience for power by the opposition and reluctance to accept the rules of the demo-

cratic process. Therefore, if five years is considered as too long to permit for the persistence of mal-governance by a particular regime we can amend the constitution to set a reduced tenure of office. The process has to be done legally with a political consensus arrived through a national consultation.

As the situation obtains now, whatever is happening is attributed to the failure of the ruling party. While this may not be fair, the inescapable reality is that by the time a regime enters

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the second half of its tenure, it has either solved its inherited problems or it has demonstrated quite conspicuously that it is on the way to doing so. Therefore, blaming misdeeds of past governments would not be accepted as legal defence to explain current deficits. Lack of action in quite credible as well as visible ways will ensure that the defaults are the responsibility of the incumbent government.

The confrontational politics in Bangladesh has now sadly entered a unique phase wherein the two principal parties have stopped talking to each other and only communicate through the newspaper headlines. This does not befit the ethos of a dem-

ocratic polity. A conciliatory political leadership would substantially enhance the credibility of the leader in the eyes of the people and the world. The government is expected to make the first gesture.

In any political dispensation the supreme leaders should engage in dialogue. The ice may be broken by the ruling party. As of now, this may seem fanciful but elsewhere in the world far more intractable adversaries have negotiated their difference. If we retrace our steps we would find that it

election under an apolitical arrangement, the process was marked by lack of grace.

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It is time to dwell at length on the relative merits of the proposition of Sir Stephen Ninian's prescription (1995) along with the 'Ishtiaque formula' (August 1995) and that of the group of five of the same period in so far as it relates to a mechanism for overseeing a free and fair election.

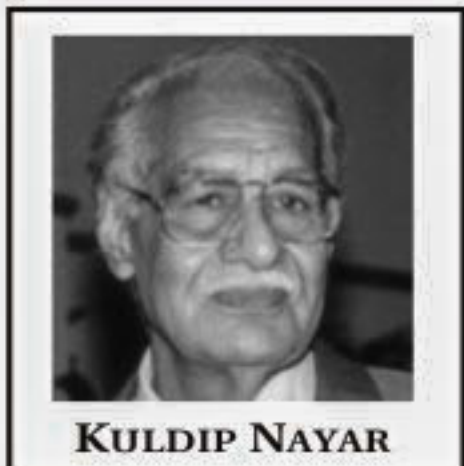
The essence of the demand of the opposition is to hold elections under a neutral non-partisan government and the essence of the government stand in this regard is that the resolution of the issue has to be within the framework of the constitution. It appears possible to arrive at a solution by remaining within the parameters of the constitution if we apply our minds to the three propositions mentioned above.

It is time to strike a balance between often competing and discordant notions of neutrality as propounded by the key political parties. Some efforts in the past, particularly of the group of five in devising the complexion of the neutral body to oversee elections, are insightful in its analysis of the political psyche of key political actors. The political attitudes have not perhaps changed favourably for democracy but the quest for a peaceful resolution of our political existence demands greater attention.

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### BETWEEN THE LINES

# Power rests with states



KULDIP NAYAR

STATE elections may not predict the shape of the next Lok Sabha in 2014, but they do reflect the mood of the

electorate. UP, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Goa and Manipur, which went to the polls, indicate that the ruling Congress is declining rapidly. The party is nowhere in UP despite the Indira Gandhi family descending on the state in full strength. Punjab and Uttarakhand, which were expected to go to the Congress, have slipped from its hands. The party has been routed in Goa and the only consolation prize is Manipur, where feuding factions do not allow a government run for long.

In fact, the other national alternative, Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), has done only slightly better. It is third in UP, slightly above the Congress, and neck and neck with the Congress in Uttarakhand. The BJP can claim to be a winner in Punjab but that is because it is riding the bandwagon of the Akali Dal. Otherwise, the BJP has come down from 19 to 12.

The obvious lesson to learn from the verdicts is that the national parties are losing space to those in the states, which represent local aspirations. The success of Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party in UP casts a shadow on the prospects of both the Congress and the BJP in the state, which has 80 Lok Sabha seats in a house of 543. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) of the outgoing chief minister Mayawati looked at one time an avalanche of Dalits sweeping the rest. But the avarice had the better of her and she has ruined the chance of a Dalit ever becoming prime minister.

The Shiromani Akali Dal's return to power in Punjab strengthens the belief that the work at the grassroots

is what counts ultimately. However, the victory for the Akali Dal, as that of Samajwadi Party, sends a message to the Congress or, for that matter, to national parties that they can no longer ignore or bypass the state parties. Their consultation is essential before framing economic and social policies. The five-year plan has to be built from below. Apart from ignoring sentiments prevailing on the ground, the Congress had to pay dear at the polls

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for the scams and the price rise. The state parties have been able to convince the electorate that corruption and high cost of living are not their doing but that of those who rule at the centre.

It looks as if the states are waking up to the clout they have because of the following of their people. Odhisa chief minister Naveen Patnaik has already raised the banner of revolt against the centre for possessing too much power. He has been supported by many chief ministers in his demand. Several chief ministers, including Mamata Banerjee from West Bengal, feel that the centre must have the states in the picture when it establishes organisations which require the support of their law and order machinery.

Recently, the anti-terrorism setup the centre was planning did not have

prior consent of chief ministers. Still, Home Minister P. Chidambaram convened a meeting of chief secretaries and director generals of police. Belonging to the all-India services and controlled by the centre, both services are manageable. The centre has to realise that the real state boss is the chief minister and he or she must be kept in the picture.

Whether a non-BJP and non-Congress front comes into being is a

that there is no alternative to decentralisation.

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The immediate problem that the ruling Congress faces is the election of president due in the middle of this year. Then there is election of the vice-president. The Congress cannot impose its choice on the parties and pick up non-entities for the top positions. Regional parties will need to be wooed. In any case, a non-Congress person having ability and eminence will ideally fill the office of president. This requires all the tact and charm that the Congress can exert. But the party is too haunted by a mid-term poll and looks pathetically clueless, and without any new idea.

Some fear that a weak centre may encourage fissiparous tendencies. This is wrong because the states are an integral part of the country. They do not want to turn to Delhi for every small concession. Today, they have to do it and they have resident commissioners to pursue their projects. Whichever party comes to power at the centre feels it must rule like the governor general of the British days. The people are more conscious of their rights. They know the value of their vote and this explains why almost 60% of the electorate, more women than men, went to polling stations to exercise their franchise.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 10

1735

An agreement between Nadir Shah and Russia is signed near Ganja and Russian troops are withdrawn from Baku.

1814

Napoleon I of France is defeated at the Battle of Laon in France.

1848

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo is ratified by the United States Senate, ending the Mexican-American War.

1969

James Earl Ray is jailed for 99 years by a court in Memphis, Tennessee, after admitting the murder of the American civil rights leader, Martin Luther King.

1970

Vietnam War: Captain Ernest Medina is charged by the U.S. Military with My Lai war crimes.

1990

Observer 'spy' sentenced to die. A court in the Iraqi capital, Baghdad, imposes the death sentence on The Observer journalist Farzad Bazoft.