

Dialogue is imperative

Neither party should put any condition

BA NGLADESH Nationalist Party (BNP) leader Moudud Ahmed has claimed that US foreign secretary Hillary Clinton and Indian finance minister had echoed his party's stand by advocating caretaker government for holding the next general election.

He reportedly insisted on the government's amending the Constitution before the talks could be held. We are lost on why he is putting a condition for talks when the dialogue would have to be all about a neutral non-partisan government for holding the next general election.

There is a general feeling among all right thinking people that to conduct a credible election for the 10th parliament, a non-party interim government is the option to take.

The opposition should not make the dialogue conditional. This is also true of the government. That is because both the BNP and the AL have serious stakes in the getting over the present impasse.

The prime minister has been counselling the opposition to join parliament and table its formula for a neutral, non-partisan government.

True, it is parliament through which an interim arrangement has to be worked out now that the original provision of the caretaker government has been struck off the statute book. Given the stiff public posturing of both the parties on the subject, however the talks could be initiated both at the informal and the formal levels to break the ice and arrive at a common ground to move ahead.

We believe no party should set a pre-condition to start the dialogue. For that is the mechanism to put all contentious issues on the table and thrash out a solution to the satisfaction of all the parties.

While we urge the opposition to join parliament as part of their constitutional obligation, the onus is on the ruling party to give the opposition the space they need to be engaged it in a meaningful dialogue.

In the meanwhile, both sides should refrain from confrontational posturing, either in words or in deeds.

The nation looks forward to creating a conducive environment for the talks to begin in earnest.

Improving public transport

A way out of our traffic maze

PROMISE of improvements in the public transport sector come as good news, especially in a traffic-chaotic city such as Dhaka. The Prime Minister, while inaugurating the operation of 33 double-decker buses of state-owned BRTC purchased from India recently, has promised the import of another 100 single-decker air-conditioned buses and 500 trucks.

In a city of over 16 million, such measures will contribute to easing the suffering of commuters. Currently, while the streets are jam-packed with vehicles, commuters still have a difficult time finding transport to get around, especially at reasonable fares. Private cars are unaffordable not only for the majority of the city's dwellers, but also for the streets of the capital in terms of the traffic gridlock. Rickshaws, though environment-friendly, do not go long distances and are barred from several routes in a step to counter traffic congestion, while CNG-run auto-rickshaws are not an affordable option for many. In this situation, increasing and improving public transport that is accessible and affordable is the best solution. Increasing the number of buses will bring down the number of vehicles on the roads and thus the traffic congestion, while also reducing the level of pollution caused by them.

The PM has noted the rising standard of BRTC service and promised further enhancements to it such as the introduction of e-ticketing and pre-paid card system, measures which would regularise the service as well as help regulate fares. She has pointed to upgrading the existing railway and river communications as well as those in the pipeline. While we appreciate these measures, we hope that they will not end here. In order to manage the mobility of our population -- particularly in urban areas -- it is vital for the public transport sector to

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



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globe and from two different countries with two different historical associations with us.

One a very close neighbour that had helped Bangladesh to achieve its independence while the other did everything short of physical intervention to prevent it, and thereafter for a time, did everything to thwart its results.

One finds it difficult to forget the sufferings caused to our people by the disruption of PL-480 in 1974 which resulted in the manmade famine in Bangladesh. It was bad example of food aid being used to put pressure on a newly independent country.

I deliberately reflect on the past to show how things have changed over the span of forty years and to reinforce the thesis propounded very recently by George Friedman that the geopolitical cycles change with each generation. And some would attribute terrorism to that change because of the manner "geopolitical cycles have intersected with changes in the way the tactic of terrorism is employed and in the actors employing it."

I would venture to suggest that terrorism, or, more specifically, the so-called Islamic terrorism, was made an excuse to initiate actions by the US to seek new partners in their so-called war on terror to justify illegal occupation of a free country and regime-change. There has been a distinct paradigm shift in approach due to this where strategic discards became front-line states in the GOWT. The role of Pakistan is a stark reminder of the geopolitical cycle change after 9/11. And the Bangladesh-US Partnership Dialogue Agreement could be another example; but the Indian

BYLINE



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your chin, cuts your tongue and produces garble that you can regret in the luxury of time. Mrs. Sushma Swaraj is a veteran who has seen the seasons, and is careful with words. She must be wondering which slip of the mind persuaded her to describe Pranab Mukherjee, the leader of her House, the Lok Sabha, and Hamid Ansari, chairman of the Rajya Sabha, as men of insufficient stature for the post of president of India. To be fair, she possibly meant that her preferred candidate for president, Abdul Kalam, had higher stature than Congress nominees. But that is not what the world heard.

A lapse lasts only as long as a news cycle. The hurry to name candidates is quite inexplicable. There are still 6 weeks left for nominations; and 10 for the actual poll. This is the time to ponder; judgment can come later. Long used to filling Rashtrapati Bhavan by selection, political parties seem a trifle bemused by the prospect of a genuine election.

Congress is merely repeating what it did in 2007: Throwing up names to check which will float, which will be punctured by pellets, and which will sink under their own deadweight. In 2007 Pranab Mukherjee was on the first Congress list. Mrs. Sonia Gandhi sabotaged Mukherjee only after he shifted from probable to

foreign minister's visit first. Pranab Mukherjee's visit, although programmed long ago, appeared to be somewhat bland because it coincided with that of the world's most powerful woman -- the US Secretary of State. The Indian finance minister's presence had to do with a cultural event; Hilary Clinton's with more serious affairs. Apart from participating in the closing ceremony of Tagore's 150th Anniversary of birth the only word of strategic significance that came from him was very discouraging. We

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have a long grind in front of us as far as Teesta is concerned and much of it because of the Congress' lack of majority in the parliament.

Mrs. Clinton's visit did raise some eyebrows and provoke variegated comments. And those ranged from the innocuous to the "encircle-China-strategy" in collaboration

with India, with Bangladesh as one of the many smaller nations in support role. But we will leave speculations aside and dwell on what is more tangible.

Certainly it would seem that there is a sudden urge on the part of the US to enter into "security partnership" with various countries. It would not be remiss to suggest that the US plan to associate Bangladesh, that was once considered a tiny speck in the backwaters of the Bay of Bengal, in a strategic partnership, is motivated by the

signed in April this year between the two countries in Kabul. That, for one thing, ensures the continued presence of US forces, particularly of its Special Operation Forces, well beyond 2014, and for another, it does not substantially alter the current operation status of the SOF, i.e. it can still undertake night raids without having to have it vetted by Karzai.

Although the Bangladesh-US agreement is an expression of intent to engage in dialogue to collaborate on different issues, the natural question is what sort of partnership is one talking about? While one understands the socio-economic elements one would need more details about the security component of the "Dialogue" and how the US sees Bangladesh participating in, "Security cooperation, including in combating terrorism, violent extremism, and transnational crime, such as narcotics trafficking, piracy, and trafficking in persons and arms?" The rubric is too large to be left to one's guess.

The joint declaration for the partnership dialogue must be seen in the context of the developments in the Middle East and Afghanistan. The war on terror had shifted to South Asia, with Afghanistan being the focus, in the last half decade. And it will not end with the departure of the US and ISAF after 2014. Experts are divided on the future equation between the US and Pakistan, each putting the blame on the other for the failure in Afghanistan. And there is increasing pressure on Pakistan to take out the Pakistani Taliban and deny sanctuary to the al-Qaeda leaders. If these come about can the largest "Muslim democracy" become a refuge for these elements who might find their stay in Pakistan no longer tenable? And that is the crux of the matter.

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The whiff of 1969

possible, after endorsement from the Left. She then pulled out Mrs. Pratibha Patil from well-deserved anonymity, aware that a short deadline left little opportunity for debate. The early Congress bird does not necessarily get the worm.

2012 is different for at least two reasons. After five years of Mrs. Patil, Indians want someone with dignity, calibre and honesty as their president. Another sleight-of-the-hand choice might, just conceivably,

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In 2007, discussions were about candidates, not victory. Today, Congress is racked with uncertainty because it heads a coalition that is invulnerable on paper and vulnerable in practice. Numbers do not bring stability; governance does. UPA 1 had focus and cogency, as well as allies who knew the value of questions. That partnership of the willing has degenerated into an alliance of the haphazard. Congress has destabilised itself; and this infection has spread to allies. If the axis of a coalition becomes unsteady, the rim cannot hold. Defeat in UP or Punjab or Delhi is only a symptom; the wasting disease

is shrinking credibility.

Each week something happens, minor or major, to jolt a party already in grip of ceaseless tremors. Examine the catalogue of the past seven days. A former Maharashtra chief minister is indicted in high-rise corruption. A former national spokesman of the party is trapped in low-rise shenanigans. A court hears allegations of corruption against the Union home minister. Revolt begins to unhinge the most successful

Congress CM, in Assam. Rumour gives the Congress CM in Andhra only a few more weeks in office. A frightened government tries to frighten media with a private member's "Print and Electronic Media Standards and Regulations Bill, 2012." It seeks to legitimise censorship and authoritarian coercion through familiar means, like an annual licence renewal and punitive fines for "unverified and dubious material," a phrase whose elasticity could bankrupt most media companies through legal fees. Government, incidentally, never has a problem with lawyers' fees: It pays them with your money. The author of this proposed legislation is Meenakshi Natrajan, whose fame rests on her proximity to Rahul

Gandhi. Congress spokesmen deny Rahul Gandhi's role; but you could hardly expect them to confirm it.

Curiously, neither the government nor the opposition has a majority in this Lok Sabha. The opposition is in disarray since the largest opposition party, BJP, has not successfully negotiated the terms of reference for a viable alternative. The government is not strong enough to govern; the opposition is not strong enough to displace it.

Government wafts along from crisis to crisis on this anomaly. The situation is reminiscent of 1969. Exploiting uncertainty with great skill, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi defied her own party and put up V.V. Giri against the official Congress nominee Sanjeeva Reddy.

Presidential campaigns are conducted in silence. When 1969's deals were done, every traditional line between left, right and centre had blurred. No one was certain which way the vote would go. Mrs. Gandhi triumphed thanks to the Akali Dal and the second preference votes of a west UP leader, Chaudhary Charan Singh. In six years, the Akalis as well as Charan Singh were in Mrs. Gandhi's Emergency jails; in 1977, they routed Congress and made Sanjeeva Reddy president.

In 1969 Mrs. Gandhi prepared two speeches on counting day. One of them was meant for defeat, in which case she would have resigned. Selection is tic-tac-toe. An election is a game with formidable stakes.

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