

CROSS TALK

Sohel Taj in Hotel California



MOHAMMAD
BADRUL AHSAN

SOHEL Taj was once a parliament member, and he also was the state minister for home. Then he chose to

be neither, erasing his political footprints in that exact order. First he resigned from the ministry and then from the parliament. He even went away so far out that he left the country to show he meant business. But like a sea that washes back garbage thrown into it, the protocol he gave up keeps coming back to him. So does his salary paid in arrears that are deposited in his account for doing a job he stopped doing. I say, the son of the first prime minister of Bangladesh is jinxed. He is trapped in Hotel California.

Those who know the famous song by the Eagles shouldn't have trouble remembering its last line: "You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave." A man refuses to go back to his job, but nobody wants to release him. Scandal leads to resignation, but what we have here is a resignation leading to scandal.

For whatever reason it may be, Taj has made it clear that he has left his job and he doesn't want to come back to it. He has made it known in so many ways besides turning in his

resignations in writing. He has talked to the media about his decision. If I am not wrong, he has even made a few phone calls to say that it was indeed him, who signed his resignation letter lest anybody had any doubts.

"What is called resignation is confirmed desperation," American tax resister Henry David Thoreau told us at least 150 years ago. Although he was talking about resignation in the sense of surrender, it still applies to this particular case. And, this is when it doesn't make sense to the people of this country. Taj may have his reasons for being desperate to quit, but why is the government so desperate to keep him? Is he that indispensable for the government, the country or his constituency?

In a way Taj's resignation was surrender. He must have done his own assessments. He must have drawn his own conclusions. Either he didn't have the courage to fight or he thought it would be futile to do so. Yet the man by no means is impervious to the sentiments of his constituency. He knows there is an element of disap-

pointment for the people who voted for him, and he wrote to them asking for their forgiveness and understanding. At times, he told them, it's the right choice to give up instead of giving in.

This is where the resignation starts getting murky. Why is the government behaving like a dog in the manger, refusing to accept his resignation in the delusional manner of a grief-stricken mother who resists burial of her dead son because she thinks he is still breathing? And what is the point of the speaker's rejection of the resignation letter on procedural grounds? How does it help the democratic process when everybody is busy splitting hairs and a constituency remains unrepresented in the nation's parliament?

When Taj resigned from his post as a state minister, the government quickly filled that vacancy. The same thing should have happened when he also resigned from the parliament. The parliament seat should have been urgently declared vacant, holding a by-election so that the people of Kaptasia could choose a new representative. Instead, the aspirations of an entire constituency

remain sidelined apparently because some people are finicky about dotting the I's and crossing the T's.

Like I have said already, we don't know why Sohel Taj tendered his double resignations. He has recently warned in a newspaper interview that if pushed against the wall, he will have no choice but to unmask some people. For the people of this country, that's hardly news. We already know so many people around us are not who they are supposed to be. We know we are living in a time when public life is one endless masquerade ball. It's difficult to tell who is who hiding behind their masks.

Another resignation drama is unfolding backwards. A minister who was asked to resign roughly a month ago is getting ready to scoot back to his old job. While so many investigations are stumbling, the investigation on this particular minister was conducted with the speed of light. And, of course, he has been given a clean chit.

My favourite lines from Hotel California: "They gathered for the feast/ They stab it with their steely knives, but they just cannot kill the beast." Sohel Taj thought he could kill that beast by withdrawing himself from the feast. Welcome to Hotel California. The beast takes revenge. It's dangling him like a loose end ever since.

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| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

How Pakistan lets terrorism fester

HUSAIN HAQQANI

RATHER than fighting terrorism, Pakistani judges and journalists are pursuing political vendettas against an elected government.

On the anniversary of Osama bin Laden's death last week, Pakistan was the only Muslim country in which hundreds of demonstrators gathered to show solidarity with the dead terrorist figurehead.

Yet, rather than asking tough questions about how bin Laden had managed to live unmolested in Pakistan for years, the Pakistani Supreme Court instead chose to punish the prime minister, Yousaf Raza Gilani, by charging him with contempt for failing to carry out the court's own partisan agenda -- in this case, pressuring the Swiss government to reopen a decades-old corruption investigation of President Asif Ali Zardari. (Never mind that Swiss officials say they are unlikely to revisit the charges.)

In handing down the decision, one justice chose to paraphrase the Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran. He held forth in a long appeal to religious-nationalist sentiment that began with the line: "Pity the nation that achieves nationhood in the name of a religion but pays little heed to truth, righteousness and accountability, which are the essence of every religion."

That a Supreme Court justice would cite poetry instead of law while sentencing an elected leader on questionable charges reflects Pakistan's deep state of denial about its true national priorities at a time when the country is threatened by religious extremism and terrorism.

Today, Pakistan is polarised between those who envision a modern, pluralist country and those who condone violence against minorities and terrorism in the name of Islam. Many are caught in the middle; they support the pluralist vision but dislike the politicians espousing it.

Meanwhile, an elephant in the room remains. We still don't know who enabled bin Laden to live freely

in Pakistan. Documents found on computers in his compound offer no direct evidence of support from Pakistan's government, army or intelligence services. But even if bin Laden relied on a private support network, our courts should be focused on identifying, arresting and prosecuting the individuals who helped him. Unfortunately, their priorities seem to lie elsewhere.

In Pakistan, most of the debate about bin Laden has centered on how and why America violated Pakistan's sovereignty by unilaterally carrying out an operation to kill him. There has been little discussion about whether the presence of the world's most-wanted terrorist in a garrison town filled with army officers was itself a threat to the sovereignty and security of Pakistan.

Pakistanis are right to see themselves as victims of terrorism and to be offended by American unilateralism in dealing with it. Last year alone, 4,447 people were killed in 476 major terrorist attacks. Over the last decade, thousands of soldiers and law enforcement officers have died fighting terrorists -- both homegrown, and those inspired by al-Qaeda's nihilist ideology.

But if anything, the reaction should be to gear up and fight jihadist ideology and those who perpetrate terrorist acts in its name; they remain the gravest threat to Pakistan's stability. Instead, our national discourse has been hijacked by those seeking to deflect attention from militant Islamic extremism.

The national mind-set that condones this sort of extremism was cultivated and encouraged under the military dictatorships of Gen. Muhammad Zia ul-Haq from 1977 to

1988 and Gen. Pervez Musharraf from 1999 to 2008. A whole generation of Pakistanis has grown up with textbooks that conflate Pakistani nationalism with Islamist exclusivism.

Anti-Western sentiment and a sense of collective victimhood were cultivated as a substitute for serious debate on social or economic policy. Militant groups were given free rein, originally with American support, to resist the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and later became an instrument of Pakistani regional influence there and in Indian-occupied Kashmir.

Pakistan's return to democracy, after the elections of 2008, offered hope. But the elected government has since been hobbled by domestic political infighting and judicial activism on every issue except extremism and terrorism.

Before Musharraf was ousted, a populist lawyers' movement successfully challenged his firing of Supreme Court justices. The lawyers' willingness to confront Mr. Musharraf in his last days raised

hopes of a new era. But over the last four years, the Court has spent most of its energy trying to dislodge the government by insisting on reopening cases of alleged corruption from the 1990s. During the same period, no significant terrorist leader has been convicted, and many have been set free by judges who overtly sympathise with their ideology.

This has happened because the lawyers' movement split into two factions after Mr. Musharraf's fall: those emphasising the rule of law and those seeking to use the judiciary as a rival to elected leaders.

Asma Jahangir, who helped lead the lawyers' movement, has become a

critic of the courts, accusing them of overstepping their constitutional mandate and falling under the influence of the security establishment. And Aitzaz Ahsan, who represented the Supreme Court's chief justice during the lawyers' showdown with Musharraf, is now Prime Minister Gilani's lawyer in the contempt-of-court case -- a clear indication of the political realignment that has taken place.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's raucous media, whose hard-won freedom is crucial for the success of democracy, has done little to help generate support for eliminating extremism and fighting terrorism. The Supreme Court, conservative opposition parties and the news media insist that confronting alleged incompetence and corruption in the current government is more important than turning Pakistan away from Islamist radicalism.

While fighting Pakistan's endemic corruption is vital, the media and judiciary have helped redirect attention away from the threat of jihadist ideology by constantly targeting the governing party -- a convenient situation for the intelligence services, which would prefer to keep the spotlight on the civilian government rather than on the militant groups they have historically supported.

Convicting the dozens of terrorists released by Pakistani courts should be a greater priority for the country's judiciary than scoring points against the elected executive branch. And the Pakistani media should be more focused on asking why those deemed terrorists internationally are celebrated as heroes at home.

Until their priorities shift, the empty pronouncements of our leaders against terrorism and the sacrifices of our soldiers in battle with militants will not suffice to change the nation's course.

The writer is a professor at Boston University, and a former ambassador.

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Opposition leaders in jail

Will worsen the situation further

THIRTY three senior leaders of the BNP and its alliance partners are in jail in connection with an arson case having been denied bail by a magistrate court in Dhaka on Thursday. The decision of the magistrate, though questionable in the sense of overall administration of justice, has apparently been taken following due process of law.

While it was entirely the jurisdiction of the judge to grant bail or not, and the judge is technically correct in the decision he has taken, one can recall that at least one person has been granted bail in the same case a few days ago.

However, there are certain legal matters that cannot be seen through a technical lens only. And while we do not want to comment on the decision we are constrained to say that in our view the entire case has been motivated by political considerations, right from the way it originated and to its final evolution through the preparation of the charge-sheet.

There are though a few aspects of the case that we are forced to comment on. First, we find it unbelievable that all the 33 accused leaders had participated in the burning of the bus. It is difficult too, to believe that such high profile leaders would feel inclined to commit arson. And we believe, given the above circumstances, the court might have been more favourably disposed towards the accused on the matter of granting bail. And one can hardly miss the self-enthused role of the police in preparing the charge sheet, which it seems they have done in very quick time. The validity of bail given by the High Court was till the framing of charges.

The result of all this is the hartal the country endured yesterday. While we are in principle opposed to hartal, and we condemn the violence that the opposition supporters indulged in on Wednesday, there is little doubt in our mind that this particular hartal has been provoked by the action of the government, and could have been avoided.

We are disappointed to note that while the general public is rooting for a dialogue between the two parties and dissipation of the political heat, the heat has instead been ratcheted up by this inconsiderate action.

Streamlining foreign recruitment procedures

Will it end workers' plight?

THANKS to irregular practices resorted to by the bulk of our private recruitment agencies, for years thousands of Bangladeshi workers serving in various international labour markets have had to suffer. The suffering was not limited to having to pay three or even four times what it normally cost to send a worker to a foreign labour market; there was constant danger of being swindled, or even worse trafficked and left to rot in a jail in some foreign land.

Thanks primarily to these illegal activities by Bangladeshi private recruiting agencies that resulted in Bangladesh losing one of its largest foreign labour market Malaysia back in 2009, an impending Memorandum of Understanding to be signed between the countries to handle export of manpower on a state-to-state level is much welcome news. The fact that two government agencies and not the private sector will handle the initial phase of the new recruitment plan is another step in the right direction. The agreement will put into effect a mechanism whereby Malaysian authorities can tap into the online database maintained by BMET for cross-referencing and the government-to-government dealing will effectively reduce cost of recruitment for aspirant overseas workers down to an estimated Tk50,000.

Before we get carried away with all this exuberance, it ought to be remembered that recruitment agencies are unlikely to sit by and let this lucrative market slip through their fingers unchallenged. It remains to be seen whether the government and in particular, Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Authority have what it takes to not give in to unscrupulous, yet financially mighty business interests. This issue is of paramount importance to the economy as foreign remittances represent an annual inflow of \$12 billion which plays a crucial role in our ability

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

May 18

- 1498**
Vasco da Gama reaches the port of Calicut, India.
- 1565**
The Siege of Malta begins, in which Ottoman forces attempt and fail to conquer Malta.
- 1803**
Napoleonic Wars: The United Kingdom revokes the Treaty of Amiens and declares war on France.
- 1804**
Napoleon Bonaparte is proclaimed Emperor of the French by the French Senate.
- 1974**
Nuclear test: under project Smiling Buddha, India successfully detonates its first nuclear weapon becoming the sixth nation to do so.
- 2009**
Sri Lankan Civil War: The LTTE are defeated by the Sri Lankan government, ending almost 26 years of fighting between the two sides.