

There will be no victors in a Syrian civil war



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

WITH the Kofi Annan peace plan all but doomed and a slow but steady escalation of violence in Syria that is looking more and more like it's going to be a bloody civil war, questions must be raised as to what sort of country Syria will be in a post-civil war era. As recent history will bear witness, such conflicts have opened up age-old wounds along ethnic and sectarian lines where one community is pitted against another and all semblance of "nationhood" conveniently goes out the window. This happened in post-Saddam Iraq and is happening today in post-Gaddafi Libya.

But before we get to a post-civil war scenario, there are several possible scenarios that may come from internal conflict in the country. With mounting human casualties causing public outcry in the region and beyond, the Assad regime is in danger of losing support of China and Russia. Indeed, if history were to repeat itself, i.e. arming of an increasingly belligerent rebel force backed up by aerial bombing under the guise of no-fly zones, the current regime is history. But Assad will not go without a fight. Syria can count on one country in the Mid-East, which is Iran, to help out in case things do get messy. A second front in Lebanon will invariably open up, for Hezbollah has everything to lose if Syria goes under. Should Hezbollah manage to force an Israeli military response, it will put Arab League nations clamouring for Assad's head into a sticky situation. Looking at it from another angle, civil war will have repercussions for all regimes in the region. A war with the Sunnis of Gulf state countries on one side allied against Syria and Iranian Shiites coupled with the Shiite-majority pitching in their lot with Alawites, the conflict could very well turn into the next big religious war in the region. In the event of such a scenario evolves, its effects will be felt in every single Middle Eastern country.

With diplomatic efforts having failed miserably, thanks partly due to the reluctance of two major veto-wielding powers in the UN, the United States would have to go it alone with yet another "coalition of the willing." But the question is whether the Obama



administration is willing to get embroiled in yet another nation building exercise? More than a decade has passed since the Iraqi adventure first commenced and the country still requires Western military presence to keep the peace. Similarly, American experience with "nation building" in Afghanistan has failed to bring peace, prosperity and stability. With nearly \$3 trillion spent on combating the war on terror and securing the home front against future threats, the uncomfortable truth is that neither country has been able to build institutions and military capabilities that allow for them to survive without foreign military presence.

Precisely how is the West going to deal with the inevitable power vacuum of a central authority? Syria, like many of its neighbours, is a nation that has been ruled by strongmen with an iron fist throughout its history. Allegiances are based along ethnic and tribal lines. What guarantee is there that the powerful militias will not disregard the Syrian National Council (SNC) leadership that has evolved over the course of the last year and the Free Syrian Army will not splinter along ethnic and religious divides to contend for power and prestige?

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There are also other security concerns. As the regime's control over the country loosens, the threat of Islamic militants gaining a foothold in Syria is evident. This was echoed recently by the Director of National Intelligence James Clapper who stated that Sunni extremists have infiltrated a number of Syrian opposition groups. There is mounting evidence that radical forces could be behind the double suicide attacks outside a military intelligence building that killed 55 people on May 10. A Sunni jihadist group called "The Front to Protect the Syrian People" claimed responsibility. This is the same group

that claimed responsibility for three other attacks in Damascus and Aleppo earlier in the year.

The debate rages on between hawks who advocate the use of force to end this seemingly endless conflict and the doves who insist more time is needed for sanctions to take effect against the regime of Assad. Given that there are live examples of what happens to the forced removal of dictatorships in the region, the West must be prepared to face the prospects of factional fighting that will most certainly erupt in the absence of a central government in Damascus. Besides the Alawites, there are Kurds represented by the Syrian-Kurdish National Council that stands apart from the SNC and have been fighting for an autonomous region for decades. There is also the Christian minority that have reason to fear backlash from the religious right in the event of a fall of the Alawite-led regime. A Syria descending into chaos has the potential to draw in regional powers into a proxy war that will not serve to advance peace in the region. The best bet, as remote as it may sound still rests in a negotiated peace settlement backed by all members of UN Security Council.

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The opposition's sensible programmes

The flexibility should lead to holding of talks

OPPOSITION leader Khaleda Zia has announced country-wide agitation programmes to press for her party's demand for restoration of caretaker government in a massive rally held in Dhaka. We commend her for not calling hartal which we always are opposed to for the stupendous, detrimental effect it has on the economy, let alone sufferings caused to people.

It is disquieting to note that even though the government belatedly let the opposition hold its rally in front of its central office, the main thrust of the government's handling was of regulatory and restrictive nature. We recall here that around 30 opposition leaders are still in jail and many new arrests have been made. The whole city was besieged as bus services were disrupted throughout the day to the immense suffering of commuters. Worse still, bus and launch services between Dhaka and the rest of the country had virtually come to a standstill, incurring huge loss to trade and commerce. In effect, a blow was dealt to the people's freedom of movement.

Understandably, all these measures were intended to keep opposition activists and supporters from attending the rally, like in the case of the March 12 rally only with some modifications. Still, the level of restriction was severe enough.

As far as the issue of an interim government goes, we think there has recently been a convergence of positions between the opposition and the ruling alliance, potentially making way for a constructive dialogue. However, instead of sitting for a dialogue, both sides are persisting with their confrontational posturing to the tremendous sufferings of the people. Such a situation is far from ideal.

We believe joining the parliamentary sessions is not only the opposition's constitutional obligation but also a forceful way to drive home their demands to the government. That way the opposition leaders can put their thoughts across to their constituencies, votebank and the people at large more convincingly than by any other means.

At the same time, the government instead of imposing oppressive measures on the opposition, should give it the space in parliament and outside to ventilate its legitimate demands peacefully and enable it to play its role in a functioning democracy.

Police highhandedness

Judge falling victim!

IN the most recent incident of police highhandedness an Additional Session's Judge of Narshingdi district court was manhandled by them outside the court premises on Sunday. This is outrageous behaviour towards a judge whose position calls for respect.

Reportedly, the said judge was initially stopped at the gate and the police on duty had wanted to search his handbag. Everyone entering the court was being searched as part of the extra security measure taken on that day in view of the hearing on the murder case of a municipal commissioner of Narshingdi. We understand that the judge had given out his identity thrice. He was perhaps initially hesitant when the police insisted on seeing his identity card but did so eventually but could not escape the wrath of another policeman who came over and hit him with his helmet.

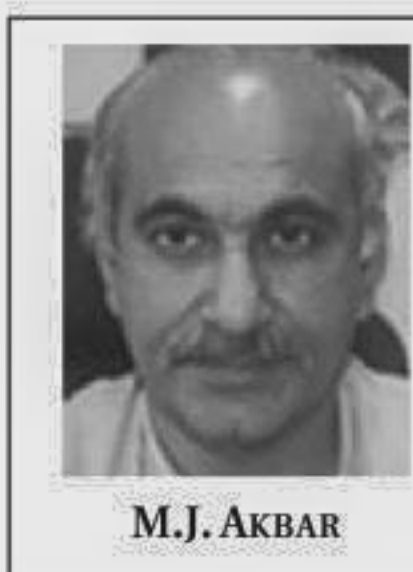
What we fail to understand is why the police have to be aggressive at the slightest opportunity. Why is the threshold of patience of our law enforcing agencies so low that they do not even care to listen to a person that the police have to deal with every day of the week in the line of duty?

What we find equally repulsive is the disingenuous practice among offending policemen to spin cock and bull stories and offer all sorts of puerile excuses, and put the blame on the other party for all that had happened. We find the police version that the steel helmet accidentally hit the judge ridiculous. The errant policemen should be made examples of. The reported suspension of three policemen cannot simply make up for the outrage they committed.

We wonder if ever the police will learn to be people

BYLINE

Umm... may we borrow the Queen?



M.J. AKBAR

THE British royal family may not be much of a family -- Queen Elizabeth II is happily married, most of her children

are happily divorced -- but by golly, is it royal! The diamond jubilee of her reign was the ultimate costume drama. It slipped from one century to another with sangfroid born out of majestic indifference to common style, which is as it should be. If royalty were deflated by common sense it wouldn't look very exalted, would it? Who on earth could wear trousers with yellow strips running along the side, as in the worst Hollywood parodies, and live to tell the tale, except the princes of the House of Windsor?

It was real only in the sense that it was occurring at a particular time and place. Its magnet was set in the ether. Even nature knew when it had met its equal. London's rain is, of course, quintessentially British, so the four-day pageant began in dark, gloomy, threatening and wet weather. But while English rain has every right to make ordinary citizens miserable, it dare not touse the hair of Her Majesty. It paused just long enough for her to enter the comfort zone of the royal barge, a gold-plated float that looked like it had once been owned by the original river queen, Cleopatra. When a courtier, trying to be familiar in front of the cameras,

thought that the weather was safe enough a topic for his Queen, she turned in that uniquely arch-motherly way and asked: "Were you surprised?" Breathless BBC, which mutes sound to protect the royals from any surprise, raised the volume on this remark and all Britain sighed in joy and adoration.

Another decade had been purchased from history. A prosaic analysis of Queen Elizabeth the Second's reign, written perhaps by a nasty Frenchman, would indicate that while

oily Tony Blair in 1997. It was famously the only occasion on which the Queen wept; or, to put it more accurately, allowed her eyes to moisten. It is well known that the only time the Queen smiles is at the races. On June 3 she beamed.

Britain's House of Windsor has survived with grace and wisdom because it understood something that its equivalents across Europe never could comprehend: That influence is a better bargain than power. Through the turmoil of the 20th century they

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her father lost India, all she did in six decades was to lose every bit of the rest of an empire that had arguably begun its ascent four centuries ago when Elizabeth the First shooed off the Spanish Armada. But only the dyspeptic recall unnecessary facts. Our contemporary Elizabeth is both traditionalist and realist. She took the departure of nations in her stride. Emotion is a liberty that is not permitted to an empress.

The one thing that grieved her during six decades on the throne was the loss of her personal yacht, *Britannia*, commissioned by a royalist Winston Churchill in 1954 and decommissioned by that deceptively

never claimed victory so could not be blamed for defeat. European autocracy was fatally wounded in the First World War, which ended in 1918. The Romanovs of All the Russias collapsed midway. The Hapsburgs of Austro-Hungary could not survive defeat. The Kaisers did not survive surrender. The Ottomans of Turkey refused to depart ceremoniously and so were kicked out unceremoniously. The Windsors left the foreground to politicians, who were dispensable and dominated the background, where they became indispensable to their people.

When it comes to a bond with their subject, this buck stops at Buckingham. No politician was per-

mitted on-stage during the jubilee celebrations, least of all the prime minister of Britain, who is merely elected. Democracy was sent off on a much-needed holiday. So when the fireworks relapsed into smoke, the band stopped playing and litter was cleared on the morning after, what did it all mean? More than words can easily communicate. The British people were uplifted; the symbol of their state had raised their spirits and restored their sagging self-belief.

Depression is not an exclusive British phenomenon. It would take a very optimistic, or indeed a very foolish, Indian to look jolly today amid the corruption of Delhi and disarray across the country. But when Indians seek comfort from their symbol of state, who do they get? Pratibha Patil. That is descent to existential angst. I have a solution. Why shouldn't India borrow the Queen of England for a bit? We would keep her only for the winter months, when the weather in any case is foul in Britain. The Queen is still happy to display the India connect. Her top jewellery comes from the subcontinent: The Lahore diamond, which she flashed during the jubilee, and the Kohinoor. Her residence in Delhi, Rashtrapati Bhavan, was built by an Englishman so she should be able to live in the style to which she is accustomed. And a coronation in Delhi would give her a third reason to smile.

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

June 12

1940
World War II: 13,000 British and French troops surrender to Major General Erwin Rommel at Saint-Valery-en-Caux.

1964
Anti-apartheid activist and ANC leader Nelson Mandela is sentenced to life in prison for sabotage in South Africa.

1987
Cold War: At the Brandenburg Gate U.S. President Ronald Reagan publicly challenges Mikhail Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall.

1990
Russia Day the parliament of the Russian Federation formally declares its sovereignty.

1991
Russians elect Boris Yeltsin as the president of the republic.

1999
Kosovo War: Operation Joint Guardian begins when a NATO-led United Nations peacekeeping force (KFOR) enters the province of Kosovo in Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.