

PM's proposal on pre-polls government

Start dialogue to build confidence first

THE prime minister in her interview with the BBC has floated the idea of forming a small government with other political parties to hold the next general elections. This raises two sets of issues; one of procedure, and the other of substance.

We take up the issue of procedure first. Before going public and spelling it out to the BBC, shouldn't the PM have discussed the matter with the contending parties who have stakes in the election? So, to begin with she committed a procedural blunder.

In an ambience of confrontational politics, the best approach should have been to send out feelers and sound out the idea with the ruling party's own allies, more particularly the contending political parties.

As the issue involves an important political restructuring to enable participatory polls, the PM has dealt with the matter in a most casual and unprofessional manner.

On the question of substance, ruling Awami League (AL)'s allies themselves are on a different tangent and have demanded holding of immediate talks, to say nothing of the opposition BNP's outright rejection of her proposal.

Given our political tradition, election held under a party government is liable to be influenced by the government in power. Already, the ruling party has politicised the institutions of the state.

The PM has not yet been able to explain the merit of the outright dissolution of the caretaker government system, except saying she is ensuring people's right to vote and strengthening democracy.

The PM's first priority should have been to build confidence among her allies and in particular, the opposition. This would have created a congenial environment. Then she should have begun a series of dialogues to come to grips with the main bone of contention, how to hold an election which will be participated by all.

All said and done, we urge the PM to engage all parties in a continuing series of dialogues designed to reach a mutually acceptable position on the issue of non-partisan arrangement to hold the general election.

Mursi's message to Israel's leadership

Pragmatism is the new president's strategy

EGYPTIAN President Mohamed Mursi is certainly in little mood to make any mistake. As the country's first elected leader and that too with a narrow margin of victory, he knows he needs to broaden his base by reaching out to all citizens. At the same time, his background as an activist of the Muslim Brotherhood is a reality which has many in Egypt and around the world worried. As an Islamist, Mursi's sympathies naturally lie with those who he believes have been at the receiving end of injustice. That explains his support for Hamas in Gaza. Add to that the clear state of discomfort Mursi's election as president has placed Egypt's military in. The soldiers have been doing all they can to divest the president of as much authority as they possibly can.

To his credit, President Mursi has so far demonstrated the kind of pragmatism he is capable of exercising in his leadership. He has been careful not to antagonize those who did not vote for him. And these are people generally considered to be liberals in Egypt's rather fractured social order. Where the military is concerned, Mursi has played a cool game. He knows he cannot afford to provoke the army into a situation where his hold on power will be threatened. He has, therefore, given the soldiers no reason to think that he poses a risk to them. That is indeed shrewdness on the president's part.

A new instance of Mursi's pragmatism is his letter to Israeli President Shimon Peres. He has reassured Israel that the peace process so long sustained by Egypt and Israel will remain an ongoing affair, albeit with the stipulation that the process should broaden out in a way that will ensure security and stability for all peoples of the region. The message has thus been spelt out clearly. The new leadership in Cairo, acknowledging the ground realities, is willing to cooperate with Israel in making the Middle East a safer region. That is a sign of Mursi's maturity and wisdom. Shimon Peres and Benjamin

Padma Bridge: Negotiated settlement or social business option

S.M. RASHED AHMED

THE resignation of Minister Syed Abul Hossain for the alleged "evidence of corruption" under the Padma Bridge project furnished by the World Bank (WB) could open the possibility of a negotiated settlement with the WB over the Padma Bridge financing; better late than never.

Negotiations with WB and other multi-lateral institutions lie at the core of any diplomacy; be it political or economic.

Ellen Goldstein, the WB country Director for Bangladesh and Nepal, in an interview with *The Daily Star* had stressed the following:

- "That our government should conduct a full and fair investigation on the allegation of corruption in accordance with the laws of Bangladesh, leading to prosecution of wrongdoers only if warranted;"
- To "temporarily exclude from public service those public official both civil servants and political appointees, alleged to have engaged in corrupt behaviour, for the duration of investigation. This is a global good practice for corruption investigations in order to protect public interests;" Ms Goldstein regretted that unfortunately, "this is one of the several measures to which government was not able to commit, contributing to our decision to cancel the loan," and
- That the government of Bangladesh "may disclose these relevant reports and related correspondence if it so chooses in the interest of public transparency."

What the WB asked is an accepted practice in the conduct of such investigations and the onus clearly depends on the government to disprove the allegations of corruption.

I felt then that the government would seize this opportunity and take necessary actions suggested by WB to vindicate its stance on no corruption being involved -- as is expected from a democratically elected government; where transparency and accountability should be at the core of good governance.

To my surprise, instead of going by the norms and practices, the government chose to look for scapegoats to divert attention from its refusal in taking action and going public on the issue. And the scapegoat again, unfortunately, was Prof. Yunus -- who, as alleged by the government, influenced the WB to cancel the loan.

Since the allegation comes from the highest elective office in the country, and echelons of the ruling party, I feel there is a need to put the record straight in the larger public interest. This, like the protracted mudslinging over Grameen, has once again hurt our image abroad and our national interest.

Whether acknowledged or not, Prof.



If the government decides to implement the Padma Bridge Project by raising domestic finance, it may face difficulties as the project has become controversial in public opinion; it may also assist corrupt elements to indulge in chandabazi/ donations. This would alienate the public further, putting the future of the project in jeopardy.

Yunus has gained extraordinary international standing abroad and any attempt to malign him on the basis of an unfounded allegation is bound to affect the realisation of the fundamental objectives of our foreign policy and diplomacy which are the front lines of our defence. I, like many, feel deeply concerned at the obvious negative implications for the country.

Regarding the insinuation against Yunus, one has to understand that the WB is an institution with its own policy framework. One person from civil society from an LDC country simply cannot influence that policy by-passing their internal process.

Why should Prof. Yunus even try to stop the money in the first place? Is he against the bridge? He himself finds the bridge vital for our country.

It should be common knowledge that the relationship between WB and Yunus has been a tense one. One can find the history of this relationship from Yunus's autobiography. Now to say that he has become so influential over the WB that he can dictate its policy is difficult to swallow.

This has been reflected in his book: "Multilateral institutions like the WB name elimination of poverty as their overarching goal. But they focus exclusively on pursuing this goal through large-scale economic growth. This means that, as long as gross domestic product (GDP) is increasing in a country or a region, the WB feels that it is achieving its mission. This

growth may be excruciatingly slow; it may be occurring at the expense of the poor -- but none of this persuades the WB to change its policies." (Creating a world without poverty, pg.11)

This should clarify doubts one may have on Yunus's influence over WB in the cancellation of the loan, and should place his relationship with WB in correct perspective.

I hope the government succeeds in its bid to renegotiate the cancelled loan, which would be in the best interest of the country. In case it fails, the government should nevertheless make every effort to maintain a good working relationship with the World Bank.

Accordingly to the WB Country Director the Padma Bridge roughly constitute about 20% of WB lending portfolio in Bangladesh, the other 80% consist of more than 30 operations with IDA and trust fund commitments of around \$4.4 billion. These will considerably benefit the people.

If the government decides to implement the Padma Bridge Project by raising domestic finance, it may face difficulties as the project has become controversial in public opinion; it may also assist corrupt elements to indulge in 'chandabazi/donations,' this would alienate the public further; placing the future of the project in jeopardy. Other negative implications have been pointed out by our experts. I, therefore, feel it may be worth-

while to explore the option of building the Padma Bridge through Social Business. Although large infrastructural projects are yet to be constructed through Social Business, Yunus is convinced that they can be built through Social Business. He wishes to apply this idea to his Cox's Bazaar Mega Project to leverage Bangladesh's strategic location.

This has been dealt at some length by him. Details can be found in the chapter "The Mega Port can be a Social Business" from his *Creating a World Without Poverty*.

Another reason for exploring this option is that the global financial institutions, including WB, are increasingly reluctant to finance physical projects. The focus of these multi-lateral financial institutions is on areas such as: provision of human services, addressing climate change, strengthening governance and accountability etc. Even the current policy direction of the bilateral donors is towards the soft ODA including the development of human capital and vital social sectors for overcoming, among others, the challenges of poverty, unemployment, water crisis, inadequate health services, food security and mal-nutrition etc.

While the world increasingly embraces the idea of Social Business, we should not be left behind. I touched on some of the notable successes achieved by Social Business in my last article "Prof. Yunus Grameen and Social Business" published in *The Daily Star*; to these I may add the recent achievements including the Declaration of Pistoia as the first Italian Social Business city that aims to create an environment for Social Business and Social innovation; the launching of Social Business initiative 'Renault Mobilise' by French car maker Renault; and keen interest shown by a team of Japanese Medical Specialists to setup Social Business venture involving the field of biomedical engineering and cardiac surgical training in Bangladesh, among others.

I believe the time has come for Social Business; we will need to work collectively to use all such innovative ideas to build a peaceful, poverty-free and self-reliant Bangladesh on the bedrock of a functional polity, rule of law, zero tolerance for corruption, nepotism, cronyism; with no room for terrorism militancy and extremism, and depoliticisation of vital organs and institutions of the government.

This is no time for rhetoric; personal animosity and disunity. It is time for national consensus backed by commitment and action to lift Bangladesh from the present gloom and despondency and to prevent its possible downward slide into an uncontrollable spiral of chaos, violence and conflict to achieve the goal for which we fought the War of Liberation.

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Russia's vital role in Syria endgame

EDITORIAL DESK: *The Straits Times*

THE conflict in Syria has reached such a violent point that support for the government of President Bashar al-Assad no longer seems tenable. The sooner Russia, its key ally, realises this, the earlier hostilities can cease. The relationship with Syria has offered Moscow advantages that have outlasted the Cold War, but these are fast turning into liabilities.

The regime's survival is now in doubt after nearly 17 months of increasingly deadly challenges by armed opposition groups. These forces have clearly demonstrated their effectiveness in reaching deep into Damascus. They carried out an audacious bombing there recently that killed three of Assad's most senior officials, including the defence minister. The opposition has occupied parts of the capital and of the northern city of Aleppo, Syria's most important commercial centre.

Government forces are likely to find it difficult to dislodge them.

With special international envoy Kofi Annan's peace efforts failing and the United Nations observer mission confined largely to hotels, the violence is likely to add more to the toll of 17,000 dead so far. There is another pressing reason for collective international intervention: The regime has betrayed a clear sign of desperation in moving its large arsenal of chemical weapons. The danger is that Assad, who has shown in recent months that he is

even more ruthless than his late father, might order his fast disintegrating regime to use them, against not only foreign forces but also his own people. Even Russia has been forced to issue a public warning.

But Moscow has to do more. It should withdraw its support for Assad and open the way to bringing all parties to the negotiating table. The stakes for Syria and for the region are too high for Russia -- and like-minded China -- to continue vetoing UN Security Council resolutions.

too high for Russia -- and like-minded China -- to continue vetoing UN Security Council resolutions. Syria is a tinderbox with simply

too many groups contending for supremacy. Clearly, the political stability that the Assads have brought for more than 40 years has ended. A tolerably orderly transition might still be possible if the regime gives up power as soon as possible. If it is left to collapse violently, the prospect is a further descent into chaos as centrifugal forces battle to fill the power vacuum.

It might become a bloodier version of the struggle for Syria immediately after independence in 1946. Ethnic, religious, regional and ideological divisions have re-emerged. Opportunistic outside terrorist groups have evidently also become engaged, sowing even more havoc. Russia should step up and join forces with other big powers, without further delay, to find a political solution and peaceful transition.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

August 2

1776
The signing of the United States Declaration of Independence took place.

1903
Fall of the Ottoman Empire: an unsuccessful uprising led by the Internal Macedonian-Adrianople Revolutionary Organization against Ottoman Turkey takes place.

1934
Gleichschaltung: Adolf Hitler becomes Führer of Germany.

1939
Albert Einstein and Leó Szilárd write a letter to Franklin D. Roosevelt, urging him to begin the Manhattan project to develop a nuclear weapon.

1945
World War II: the Potsdam Conference, at which the Allied Powers discuss the future of the defeated.

1989
Pakistan is re-admitted to the Commonwealth of Nations after having restoring democracy for the first time since 1972.

1990
Iraq invades Kuwait, eventually leading to the Gulf War.