

PM's resolve to be firm

Be tough not on students but on corrupt

RECENTLY the prime minister has said that she knew very well how to be tough in dealing with students' protest. Such firmness was expressed while she was commenting on the ongoing BUET imbroglio.

While we welcome heartily the PM's intention to be firm, we cannot expect anything but from the head of the government in dealing with national issues, we are constrained to say that students are not quite the ones that the PM ought to apply her firmness on.

There are a raft of issues and number of persons that should have been at the receiving end of her firmness, but weren't. There are so many pressing concerns other than the protesting students that should have been handled with firmness and fairness. On the contrary we are dismayed to see the partisan handling of these matters. And it is the perception of the public that such an attitude on the part of the head of the government, on a constant mode of denial, is an attempt to shield her advisors and ministers, some of whose probity has been called in to question. It seems that instead of dealing with them with a heavy hand she is given in to them.

We would have been very happy to see the resolve of the PM to stem the spate of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearance. We would have welcomed her pronouncements to address the allegations against some of her colleagues related to the Padma Bridge funding. We have heard nothing from her regarding the railway scam, and the less we say about the share and Sonali Bank scam the better.

We wonder whether it has occurred to the prime minister or any of her colleagues in the cabinet that the palpable inertia on the prime minister and her government's part in dealing with these issues has had a serious and deleterious impact on the quality of governance, whose manifestation we are witnessing in every walk of life. The situation should be redressed, and firmly.

55th position in survey of internet impact

High cost, poor infrastructure behind low ranking

BANGLADESH has ranked among the last 10 countries in a survey conducted by the World Wide Web Foundation on the impact of the internet on both developed and developing countries of the world. The last among countries in the Asia Pacific region, Bangladesh is followed only by Namibia, Ethiopia, Benin, Burkina Faso, Zimbabwe and Yemen.

The survey has looked at web readiness -- that is, infrastructure and policy and how well these facilitate connectivity -- and web use, or the percentage of people who use the internet. Finally, it has attempted to determine impact of the web, through social, economic and political indicators such as social networks and business internet use. Poor infrastructure and high cost of internet access have been identified as some of the barriers to ICT use and impact in low-ranking countries such as Bangladesh -- where 3.5% of the population used the internet in 2011, according to a World Bank report published this year.

While the number has grown steadily over the years, we expected greater growth and, indeed, greater impact on the people, especially considering the current government's repeated promises of a "Digital Bangladesh". True, internet use is common among the urban, educated classes and service is now available even in rural areas, but access remains limited. The digital divide functions not only between the urban and rural, rich and the poor, but also between the sexes, with poor, rural women having the least access of all. Economic factors of cost, physical and geographical factors of location and distribution, as well as lack of basic computer education at the school level all contribute to the restricted access to and use of the internet by rural and low-income groups.

In order for the worldwide web to have a greater and more positive impact on our citizens, we hope the government will do everything necessary to reduce cost, increase access and develop literacy to enable people to

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 11

1803 Battle of Delhi, during the Second Anglo-Maratha War, between British troops under General Lake, and Marathas of Scindia's army under General Louis Bourquin.

1965 Indo-Pakistani War: The Indian Army captures the town of Burki, just southeast of Lahore.

1971 The Egyptian Constitution becomes official.

1978 U.S. President Jimmy Carter, President Anwar Sadat of Egypt, and Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel meet at Camp David and agree on the Camp David Accords a framework for peace between Israel and Egypt and a comprehensive peace in the Middle East.

2001 In the USA three hijacked aircraft are deliberately crashed into the twin World Trade Center towers (which collapse) in New York City and the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, in a co-ordinated attack which became known as "9/11". Another hijacked airliner in the same attack crashes in a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Nearly 3,000 people are killed.

9/11: A world-changing event



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

marked a decisive change in long-term US foreign policy. Prior to the 9/11 attacks, foreign policy was decidedly concentrated on Russia and China, on formulating effective ways to deal with states gone bad, such as North Korea and Libya, on how to find better ways to tackle rulers like Saddam Hussein through more effective sanctions, etc. All that changed with the attack on American soil by a new breed of Islamic radicals.

The Bush administration decided to launch a "global war on terror" that focused not merely on al-Qaeda but also on worldwide terrorist threats. The new policy involved going after suspected financing states that harboured such movements. Possession of suspected weapons of mass destruction (WMD) by foreign states and exporting democracy formed other important elements of the new thinking in Washington. Indeed George W. Bush stated in the inaugural speech during his second term in 2005 that "the survival of liberty in our land depends on the success of liberty in other lands."

For the US to buttress its aggressive new stance, military and intelligence capabilities underwent fundamental changes. Defence expenditures increased exponentially, new bases of operations proliferated in Central and Southwest Asia and the war on terror became the number 1 agenda of the administration. What had been hoped to be quick retribution, turned into a bloody and costly protracted war in Afghanistan. Osama Bin Laden was killed in May, 2011, but Al Qaeda remains in various shades and hues scattered across the globe. And as the US prepares to withdraw from both Iraq

and Afghanistan, it leaves behind an embittered Muslim world community over perceived double standards on the issue of Iraq's so-called possession of WMDs and "nation building" as an excuse to occupy rather than liberate, while it stands against the issue of Palestinians gaining full Statehood.

The policy of active engagement wherever terrorists or their benefactors were situated has helped upset

whatever cost, so as to not to go the way of the Kaddafi regime in Libya which voluntarily dismantled its fledgling nuclear programme some years earlier but capitulated with help of foreign intervention in 2011.

In its preoccupation to win the "war on terror," US economy has borne the brunt of increased defence spending to finance its foreign military interventions. According to data released by

continues till date.

On the strategic front, China used the last decade to quietly increase its military capabilities to supplant Russia as the world's No. 2 power while the US remained engrossed over Afghanistan and Iraq. Both militarily and economically, the US is, today, at a huge disadvantage to China with US trade deficit standing at about \$1,100 billion in 2001 from a mere \$78 billion in 2011.

While it propagates the export of democracy and liberty, the US has inadvertently been forced to join hands with some of the most authoritarian states to fight its war on terror. These include Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, to name but a few. And though more terrorists have been caught and killed over the last decade, contained terrorist financing regimes and financial networks globally through the passage of UN's Anti-terrorism Convention, a 2008 report on counterterrorism by the Centre for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments pointed out in no unclear terms that these gains were "offset by the metastasis of al-Qaeda organisation into a global movement, the spread and intensification of Salafi-Jihadi ideology, the resurgence of Iranian regional influence, and the growth in the number of political influence of Islamic fundamentalist political parties throughout the world."

In retrospect, as we look on eleven years since the tragic events of September 11, 2001, the fundamental tensions underlying international relations of the United States have not really been resolved. The question in the final analysis is whether the US learnt much from the attacks or did it rely on gut reactions. Historians will debate for years to come on how much damage was done by the neoconservatives who effectively hijacked the foreign policy agenda of the Bush administration, inherited largely by his successor President Obama.

The writer is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

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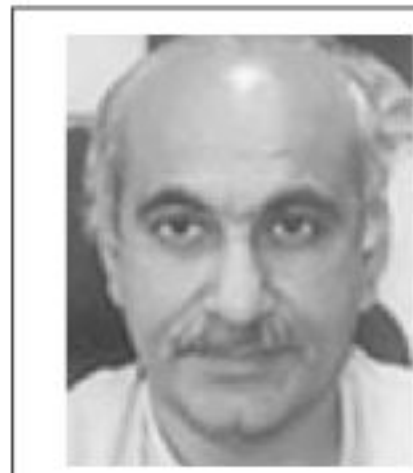


balance of power, particularly in the Middle East. The ousting of the Saddam regime and the subsequent collapse of the Iraqi state has removed an important counterbalance to Iran. Interestingly, while US policy has been focused on foreign states deemed to be potentially a threat to regional security from gaining WMDs, one of the pitfalls of American advocacy for "regime change" has only helped increase the resolve of countries like Iran and North Korea to attain the "bomb" at

Congressional Research Service, it has already crossed \$1.3 trillion. While the US budget went from a surplus of \$128 billion in 2001 to a deficit of \$458 billion in 2008, defence spending doubled from \$304 billion to \$616 billion over the same period. To put it in another perspective, federal debt as a percentage of GDP rose from 32.5 per cent in 2001 to 53.5 per cent in 2009. The continued rise in the federal deficit was ultimately one of the key reasons for recession in 2008, which

BYLINE

A perfect storm of stupidity



M.J. AKBAR

were a political death sentence, quite a portion of the UPA cabinet would not have been elected in 2009. Perhaps corruption is measured by extent; only when lubrication turns into loot does the voter decide that enough is enough. Conversely, even passing silliness creates disproportionate damage, possibly because the punishment is ridicule. Laughter can be more dangerous for reputation than a court sentence.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has had a difficult Parliament session. The opposition attack on the allotment of coal blocks will hurt the Congress more than him, because at worst the PM can be accused of being a facilitator rather than a beneficiary. The beneficiaries were those who kicked back some of their expected loot to political parties, principally the Congress, but hardly the only party to use this route to welfare. The list of coal-cronies includes not just politicians' friends and relatives, but crosses over into media. This is the way in which some media owners demand and get their rewards for being subservient to authority. These are the revelations that separate wheat from chaff, or independent media from quislings.

Politicians in power live, if not always amicably, with media all the time. It is therefore a trifle strange that they never seem to understand the dynamics of independent journalism. News, as someone who knew the business said, is something someone wants to hide. The paradox is quite logical: often the easiest way to kill a story is to hold a press conference. If you have nothing

point. Politicians get coy when praised, which is only human. But they should set aside that equally human weakness, wrath, when confronted with criticism. Another paradox: the best way to deal with an opinion you do not like is to ignore it. The sensible minister, or indeed prime minister, does not respond to the writer, he responds to the reader -- and chooses his

non-event when an officious media advisor to Dr. Manmohan Singh thought that he would crush a journalist from the *Washington Post*, Simon Denyer, and send a stern signal to Indian reporters in the process, with a withering salvo of accusations. This pesky foreign correspondent had dared to commit the unpardonable impropriety of criticising the prime minister of India. If this was intended to cow down Denyer, it had the opposite effect. And if it was meant to frighten Indian media, then the consequences were worse, for a story which would have been ignored or reduced to the margins rose to the top of attention. The official's pomposity was an invitation to laughter, and who could resist such an offer? This must be a high point of disservice to Dr. Manmohan Singh by a man hired to serve.

Reportage merges a narrative of events with context. When a government has lost the plot, media will become a mirror of disarray and failure. Governments love journalists when the going is good; they all become potential censors when the ebb tide turns up. The freedom of India's press is not a gift from government. It is an inalienable Constitutional right. Officials will come, and sometime go faster than they come; the Constitution lives on as long as democracy survives.

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The other part of media is opinion and analysis. A politician in power has every right to dispute analysis, but must be as meticulous as a silken lawyer in finding incontrovertible answers that dissect each point and prove it to be either hollow or distorted. Lawyer-politicians are obviously useful for such an exercise, but when they cut corners to push an unsustainable point they damage their own case. Witness the argument that there was zero-loss to the government in both the 2G stink and the Coalgate stain. The UPA has suffered badly from hyperventilation masquerading as argument.

Opinion, however, is a separate privilege. To accuse an opinion of being biased is to miss the point, since it is what it says it is, a view-

moment to do so.

Since this is becoming a litany of oxymoron, why not one which should be turned into an operating law of governance? The worst person that government can hire to "manage" media is a journalist. There is something in the culture transfer from a flowing newsroom to the granite blocks of a government building that transforms a journalist into the worst form of new convert. It is an old saying that the new convert prays seven times a day. He becomes holier than thou.

And so, when told to fix a story he attempts to fix the journalist. Aggression swells the ego and wells up hidden dyspepsia in proportions that become toxic -- not for the target but for the government. A perfect storm was brewed out of a