

SUNDAY POUCH

Concern expressed over human rights

Uphold rule of law by all means

HUMAN Rights Forum (HRF), a national coalition of 19 rights and development organizations, has portrayed a disquieting picture of the human rights situation. The statistics over the last four years of the AL-led Mohajote government speak for themselves: a total of 156 people have disappeared and 462 got killed in what is euphemistically called crossfire between 2009 and 2012. The figures work out to 39 'forced' disappearances and slightly above 115 extra-judicial killings respectively per year.

This is unacceptable in a democratic polity which should essentially be based on transparency and accountability of its institutions. Cloak-and-dagger policy usually associated with any 'specialised' agency in authoritarian rule is completely out of character with standard norms of democracy. If the government of the day should allow any agency of law enforcement to behave arbitrarily, sooner or later it would abuse power, almost becoming a law unto itself. Much that a major party before polls pledges to curb extra-judicial killings, it reneges on the pledge as soon as it comes to power.

This government stood committed to UNHCR that it would show zero tolerance to extra-judicial killings and to any kind of political repression but 'it did not keep its promises,' regretted HRF-Bangladesh president Sultana Kamal.

In the process, rule of law is undermined; public confidence in custodians of law diminishes; and a sense of insecurity is heightened among the people.

The importance of the HRF report lies in the fact that this has gone to UNHCR to be tabled for discussion in the UN rights body's Geneva meet early next year where the government would be required to respond to the analysis and observations made in a home grown report with inputs from a plethora of rights and development organisations. The international human rights organisations have from time to time expressed their concern over human rights situation in Bangladesh. Now, a national human rights forum in addition to the NHRC has given its perspective which is no different from what has already become public knowledge in terms of human rights issues.

It is time the government addressed the concerns with all the seriousness these deserve.

Spiralling conflict in Gaza

UN should prevail upon both sides to exercise restraint

WITH Israel's massive air attacks on Hamas-ruled Gaza strip on Wednesday and Hamas militants responding with rocket fires, the fear that the conflict may spiral into a full-fledged second Gaza war is rising. Israeli air attacks have already taken severe toll of civilian lives in Gaza.

We are gravely concerned at this fresh spate of violence since further escalation of the situation has the potential to turn Gaza into a humanitarian disaster zone. Though Israel has claimed that it is only targeting only military installations, civilian population has not been spared in Wednesday's attacks as well as those carried out until Saturday last.

Israel's use of disproportionate force has characterised its bellicosity towards the Palestinians, which may not go unresponded given Hamas' increasing firepower.

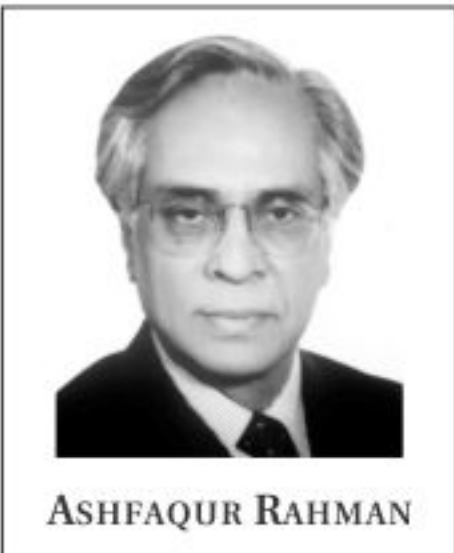
While the Arab nations notably Egypt, with Islamic Brotherhood in power having a history of fraternal relations with the Hamas, have condemned Israeli attack, the West has asked both Israel and the Hamas for restraint. The US has supported Israel reiterating that it has the right to self-defence. Considering the death figures on the Palestinians' side vis-à-vis that of the Israelis, one is led to believe that Israel is not acting in defence, rather it has started an all-out offensive against the Gazans.

The threatening postures of hawks in Israel is further fuelling the wild speculation that its ground offensive against Gaza is imminent.

In that eventuality, the conflict may not remain confined between Israel and the Hamas and given the current state of volatility in the region, it may well spill over drawing other Middle Eastern nations into the vortex.

UN Security Council may consider convening a session to stop further escalation of the conflict in the region as the US weighs in with Tel Aviv to pull back from any

China gets new leaders: What now?



ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

CHINA officially ended the 18th National People's Congress of its Communist Party last week. Apart from confirming 205

members and 171 alternate members, the 2,270 delegates announced the much awaited seven member Standing Committee of the Politburo. This Standing Committee is the top decision making body in China, who collectively take major policy decisions that can affect the daily lives of the 1.3 billion people. The seven are therefore will be the most powerful men in China for the next decade.

Leadership changes in China do not come about through polls or debates on policy matters. They are usually determined through horse trading and deal making behind closed doors among retired leaders and party elders. Thus, outgoing President Hu Jintao and retired President Jiang Zemin, with their associates, could have led the charge and counter-charge.

It is this lack of transparency about change in power that is the main disconnect in that country. Today, the demanding and internet-enabled people of China remain dissatisfied in spite of its growing affluence because they do not have any voice in deciding who their leaders would be.

Incoming President Xi Jinping, in his first address after getting his endorsement, outlined the challenges that China faced. He said that the Communist Party was increasingly being divorced from the people. There is corruption in high places. There is also increased bureaucratism among party officials. These pressing problems must be resolved quickly if the party is to survive and help the country move forward.

The new leadership seems to be aware of some of the problems. But there is no publicly known

programme about how it will address them. The way forward still seems to be up in the sky. Add to this the growing inequality in income between people and among the regions of China. The people living in the east coast are well off, while middle China and west China are economically far behind. Environmental woes are also staggering as industrial pollution is asphyxiating the people and the land.

There is therefore no doubt that serious problems face China. But the most alarming is the dysfunctional politics, both within the party and outside, that may be hobbling China's economic growth. From a torrid 11%

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to 13% annual growth the Chinese economy has now slowed down to 8% to 9% growth.

If China wants to record higher growth, it has to introduce structural changes. It needs to switch from being an export driven economy to an innovation led society. Innovation and technological changes cannot take place in a closed society. Innovation takes place when knowledge and information are allowed to flow freely.

China so far has prospered on copying and adopting technologies and innovation that had spawned elsewhere, like the US, Europe or Japan. If it now has to stand alone, it must allow the free flow of information and knowledge. Is China's political system ready to do so? Again, consumption and service sector development needs stronger rule of law. A political system that camouflages things cannot always ensure accountability as it is not transparent.

The new leadership, while understanding the changing circumstances, may be cagey about political reforms.

Yet it would want to be on the right side of history. Otherwise, it is afraid, a revolution may overtake it. So, this fifth-generation of Chinese leadership (since 1949) faces tough choices. The party has to initiate political reforms by giving up some of its privileges or be a part of history.

So what specific political reforms should China initiate? That the leaders are concerned about corruption within themselves is good. But more is needed than just an anti-corruption campaign. That is not likely to bring back public confidence in the system of governance.

The first reform should be in the

resources and privileges. In fact, they control the banking system and speculate where state credit can be pumped into. They manipulated the real estate sector in China, which led to its near collapse. These two special interest groups should work together to serve the people, and not vice versa.

China has seen the emergence of new forces. To start with, there is now a strong 300 million middle class. These people are accruing wealth, influence and knowledge. The next is the legal profession. They are churning out in large numbers from universities across the country. These professionals are not happy about the current problems. They are for constitutionalism. They are in many ways idealistic and want to revive the spirit of the Chinese revolution and not its excesses.

The third is the commercial and social media. Their number is almost 550 million people. About one billion people now have mobile phones and are individually empowered. These people together are shaping Chinese society and politics. The last emerging force is the 211 million migrant labourers. They seek higher salaries, social justice and equal rights similar to those enjoyed by urban residents. The Chinese Communist Party, with 81 million members, will increasingly be marginalised unless it introduces major political and economic reforms soon.

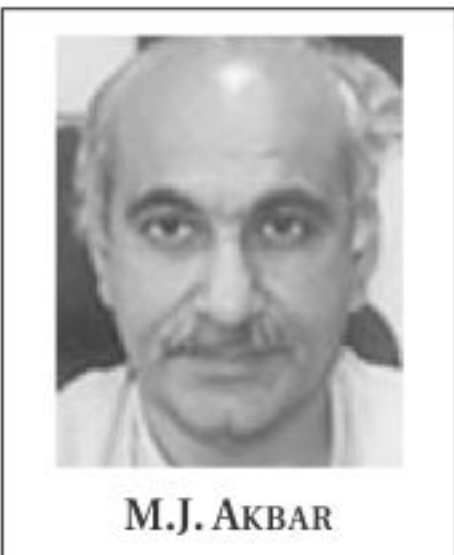
However the new leadership will not be able to initiate any significant reforms, at least not before October 2013. The new president is likely to be hobbled by a collective decision making process that now values compromise. So the Chinese people have to be patient and the world has to wait and see.

We in Bangladesh felicitate the seven powerful men led by President Xi Jinping on assuming their leadership roles. The new president had visited Bangladesh when he was vice president. We know him as an enlightened and tolerant person. We wish him and his team Godspeed.

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BYLINE

The war that did not take place



M.J. AKBAR

IF by any mistake Democrats had publicized widely why I, if perchance an American citizen, would have voted for Barack Obama, his tight victory

might just have become that much more tense. Nothing that Obama did, and he did more than he is given credit for, matched, as far as West and South Asia are concerned, the one thing he refused to do: go to war with Iran under pressure from hawks in Washington and hunter-falcons in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. His cool deflection of warmongers in the heat of elections was quintessential leadership.

He outmanoeuvred one of the wildest politicians in the world, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. He watched without a flicker of an eyelid as Netanyahu exploited his special cache in American politics, and snubbed him as no ally had ever dared to do. Obama was quiet when Netanyahu and Washington's legislature staged political drama to upstage the White House; Netanyahu virtually accused him of appeasing a nuclear Iran and was drowned in applause. Implicit in this game was an insinuation, never voiced of course, that Obama was secretly pro-Iran. Mitt Romney played this gallery; and Netanyahu's judgement became so heady that he brazenly invested in a Romney victory.

Obama understood the risks, but

did not flinch. Jewish support for him slipped from an overwhelming 78% in 2008, to 69%. To the credit of American Jews, by far the greater majority backed their President's moderation against the provocations of warmongers. Netanyahu upped his gamble by ordering a silly attack on a Sudan factory, on the pretext that it was building Iranian missiles, as if Sudan was capable of doing so even if it wanted to.

Action, but no reaction. Obama finessed each challenge with the ease of a master strategist, and kept the

When Obama did initiate significant change he preferred to temper his rhetoric, as if he was not certain about how many votes this would cost on election day. This is why he was so limp in the first debate with Romney; he thought he could fudge his way with silence and a pleasant nod.

world safe from a conflagration that would have made Iraq seem like a sideshow.

This was neither appeasement nor weakness; this was judgement. Obama has not become soft on Iran. He will not allow Iran to become a nuclear power under his watch. But he will not send American troops to premature war just because Netanyahu wants one. Obama is neither goose nor duckling. He is not a pacifist, as Pakistan has discovered. But for him, war is a last option, not a first strike. Such conviction requires more courage than George Bush and Mitt Romney, both of whom

escaped the warfront in Vietnam through humbug: Romney became a teenage preacher for his church in the rather charming city of Paris; there is no record of how many Frenchmen he converted to Mormonism.

Ironically, this clarity was missing in Obama's domestic policy. When he did initiate significant change, whether on women's rights, same sex marriage or health care, he preferred to temper his rhetoric, as if he was not certain about how many votes this would cost on election day. This is why Obama was so limp in the first

debate with Mitt Romney; he thought he could fudge his way with silence and a pleasant nod. Those who believed in him were shocked at the sight of a leader who did not seem to believe in himself. In 2008 candidate Obama invested in change because he saw that America was changing; four years in office put so much dust in his eyes that he could no longer see how much America had changed.

In 2004 the war-tarred George Bush managed to squeak past John Kerry because he mobilised the anti-gay vote. In 2012, America got its first lesbian Senator Tammy Baldwin defeated the heavyweight

Republican, Governor Tommy Thomson, in Wisconsin. In Missouri Claire McCaskill punctured Republican Todd Akin, who had the temerity to say that a woman's body could in some mysterious way prevent pregnancy after "legitimate rape". This was also probably the first time in public discourse that rape had been segmented as legitimate and illegitimate. Indiana's incumbent Republican Richard Mourdock, went a step further; he thought that pregnancy after rape was "God's will". God told him it wasn't. He lost his seat. In Massachusetts, the former Harvard professor Elizabeth Warren recaptured an old Democratic stronghold, Ted Kennedy's seat, on a feminist platform that was remarkable for its straight talk.

The old language is dead. American liberals have recaptured the mind, and they are not going to surrender their nation in a hurry. A self-confident woman has taken her place at the high table of power, and the new majority is being structured in alliance with the Obama man. Mitt Romney is the last candidate of an age that has been defeated.

This will have, inevitably, implications for foreign policy as well. Iran will be wise to use the opportunity for dialogue, and seek ways towards a guarantee of non-intervention, its primary concern, and a Palestinian state, its parallel demand. An optimist would call both inevitable; I shall limit myself to saying only that both are possible.

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

November 18

1601 Tiryaki Hasan Pasha, provincial governor of Ottoman Empire, utterly defeats Habsburg forces, commanded by Ferdinand the Archduke of Austria during the Siege of Nagykanizsa.

1918 Latvia declares its independence from Russia.

1940 World War II: German leader Adolf Hitler and Italian Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano meet to discuss Benito Mussolini's disastrous invasion of Greece.

2002 Iraq disarmament crisis: United Nations weapons inspectors led by Hans Blix arrive in Iraq.