

GROUND REALITIES

Opposition's roadside rallies

Let these pass off peacefully

TODAY rallies are being held at six points of the congested city in a daylong mass contact programme as part of the opposition alliance's movement for restoration of caretaker government system.

Before staging these, the opposition had followed the standard procedures of obtaining permission from the government. Accordingly, the administration showed green light, for which we appreciate the government's good sense.

Is the Opposition so far avoiding more *hartals*, and the government giving permission for today's rallies, reflective of (a) both sides showing a spirit of accommodation to each other on howsoever modest a scale it has come about; and (b) a certain respect shown to public sensibilities? We would like to hope so.

One cannot fail to see, however, the loaded nature of today's rallies. These are being staged at six different locations of the city with the glaring prospect of huge traffic tailbacks and consequent suffering in terms of public movement all over the city. Also, what is important to note is the possibility of untoward incidents which cannot be altogether ruled out. Although BNP leaders have made it clear that the rallies programme will be peaceful, one cannot be too sure about the behaviour of activists on whom the parties have had little control so far. Besides, Awami League organising secretary has warned against any violent activity. Should that happen, the government or the AL threatened not to remain silent.

Actually, trading in threats and counter threats of a showdown cannot solve political, far less, a constitutional issue.

It is therefore vital for the future of the nation that the ruling and opposition alliances rethink their rigid positions and take the path of discussion in an extended spirit of accommodation to engage each other for resolving the contentious but solvable interim caretaker issue.

Since the winter session of the parliament is approaching, this should be treated as a forum to iron out differences and arrive at a middle ground between the two extremes.

Books to reach students

on time

Let it infuse dynamism in schools

THE education ministry plans to observe the Textbook Festival Day on January 1, 2013 through reaching textbooks to all the primary and secondary level students across the country.

The observance will mark the distribution of some 26.17 crore copies of textbooks printed under the new curriculum among 3.68 crore students at the primary and secondary levels including madrasahs and vocational schools.

Undoubtedly, this will be a significant achievement by the education ministry. So, thanks are due, in particular, to the education minister Nurul Islam Nahid.

It may be recalled that due to inordinate delay in distributing textbooks in the past, students of both primary and secondary levels had to suffer immensely. In consequence, a good part of their academic year would be wasted. Though the primary level students could get their books free of cost, the books, more often than not, would arrive late. As a result, many guardians had to buy the books from black market.

The chaotic situation prevailing in distribution of textbooks in the past had been attributed to the nexus between an evil syndicate within a section of printers and some corrupt officials in the education department.

Reassuringly, the situation has changed for the better since.

Having said that, questions remain if the books printed under the new curriculum could be published error-free. Arrangements should be in place to detect inaccuracies and mistakes without any loss of time.

The new curriculum from this academic session would, on the other hand, require teachers' orientation so that they are able to instruct students properly.

Hopefully, the education ministry has provided necessary attention to this issue that is critically linked to the students' grasping of the lessons imparted in their classes.

Hopefully, the improvements so made would stimulate fresh enthusiasm among teachers and students alike and infuse dynamism and a sense of purpose in the pri-



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THERE are certain classes of people who think that military rule or martial law is imposed in a country when politicians make a

mess of things. That is simply not true. Those who put such arguments forward are pretty much at a distance from a study of history not just in Bangladesh but elsewhere around the world.

In an age where politician-bashing has become the trend, where every problem is associated with the way politicians conduct themselves, it is important that the truth about the damage done through a military commandeering of the state be revealed.

There is the instance of Thailand, where throughout the 1960s and 1970s, it was quite the fashionable thing for its generals to take turns in seizing the state and thereby keeping politicians away from decision-making. And those officers had no credible reason to take over the state, save a need to satisfy their own huge egos.

In the process, they left Thailand's political process damaged, to a point where figures like Thaksin Shinawatra and his sibling Yingluck Shinawatra even now live in fear of the military going adventurist any time.

For long years, following the bloody coup that placed the army in power in Turkey in 1960, Ankara was constantly embarrassed before the world. Its soldiers underwrote the country's constitution, so much so that prime ministers were compelled to operate but by leave of the military. It was not until Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Abdullah Gul won a popular mandate to govern that Turkey's soldiers lent themselves to taming.

A brief history of coups d'etat

Today the country is a respected member of the global community.

Nigeria's fledgling democracy was destroyed in 1966 when its army murdered Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and his ministers and seized power. The military did incalculable damage to the country, for decades together. The nadir of military rule was reached under the corrupt Sani Abacha, who will forever remain notorious for the execution he ordered of the writer and human rights activist Ken Saro Wiwa in the later 1990s. Under the rule of the

rather bright with the civilian U Nu administering the country in the post-independence period, until General Ne Win staged his coup d'etat in 1962. Ne Win's long stay in power, till 1988, reduced Burma from a prosperous nation that exported rice to one where people had to queue up to buy toothpaste. The army called it the Burmese way to socialism.

In truth, it was farce in thick shades of black. And after 1988, the Burmese military presided over a

are yet being felt in Pakistan. Pervez Musharraf overthrew the elected government of Nawaz Sharif in 1999 only because he had been dismissed from his job as army chief.

In Bangladesh, military meddling in politics began with the ouster of the elected government of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in August 1975. The army take-over occurred through the assassination of the Father of the Nation and, a few months later, of the four Mujibnagar government leaders. It opened up deep divisions within the military, took Bangladesh back to the narrow alley of communalism, a move formalised by the coup of March 1982, when General Ershad decreed Islam as the religion of the state.

One by one, all the values which had gone into a prosecution of the War of Liberation, all the principles upon which our liberty was based, were thrown out the window by military rule.

The coup by a band of colonels in Greece in 1967, for reasons hard to find, took a democratic society away from its moorings and kept it there for several years. It would not be until the Turkish invasion of Northern Cyprus in 1974 that the colonels would be forced out and power returned to politicians. The exiled Konstantine Karamanlis would be called back to clean up the mess left behind by the army.

Military rule or martial law has left societies in Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Algeria, Ghana, Sudan, Congo, Fiji, Liberia, Guinea, Uganda and other countries badly wounded. In all these countries, it is today a major responsibility of politicians, long derided by soldiers, to restore civility and good governance through means patently democratic.

And that is the unvarnished truth, despite the spurious arguments some people might put forth to the contrary.

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Every bout of military rule anywhere has only left a putrefaction of corruption behind. It has undermined politics and created a class-based society that in the end has favoured certain elitist groups in society.

soldiers, an oil-rich Nigeria became hostage to multinationals' depredations and eventually turned into one of the poorest nations on earth.

General Suharto's rise in Indonesia in the mid-1960s came through the murder of a million Indonesians suspected of being communists as also through the killing of six generals on the night of September 30, 1965.

President Sukarno was stripped of power and, like Nigeria, Indonesia passed into the dark shadow of western multinationals. And for thirty-two years, Suharto presided over a kleptocracy that squeezed the country of nearly every ounce of energy. The soldiers reduced the country, once a beacon of hope for the Third World, into just one more country doing the bidding of affluent westerners. As a consequence of the military's involvement in politics, democracy in Indonesia continues to stumble.

And there is, of course, the case of Myanmar or Burma. The country was badly wounded when, on the eve of independence in the late 1940s, General Aung San was murdered by mutinous soldiers. But hope burned

brutal regime that left the country isolated from the rest of the world. Today, it is democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi who goes around the world restoring Burma to the rest of the world.

Every bout of military rule anywhere has only left a putrefaction of corruption behind. It has undermined politics and created a class-based society that in the end has favoured certain elitist groups in society. Iskandar Mirza and Ayub Khan conspired to impose martial law in Pakistan in 1958, only months away from the general elections scheduled for February 1959. Over the next decade, Ayub Khan corrupted the civil and military bureaucracy, promoted a system that had second and third rate politicians jumping on to his bandwagon and did everything to stifle dissent among the political classes that mattered.

His successor Yahya Khan, unable to cope with the results of the country's first-ever general elections in 1970, presided over a genocide in its eastern province and, ultimately, a break-up of Pakistan. And the consequences of Ziaul Huq's Islamisation

| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

To save Syria, America needs Russia's help

DIMITRI K. SIMES and PAUL J. SAUNDERS

ON Thursday, Russia's president, Vladimir V. Putin, publicly distanced the Kremlin from Syria's president, Bashar Assad, announcing, "We are not concerned about the fate of Assad's regime." As Syria's rebels continue to gain ground and Russia loses faith in Assad, America has an opportunity to both end the carnage in Syria and improve its relations with Moscow.

Helping oust Assad is an important American objective, but it pales in comparison with preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. Indeed, removing Assad in a manner that alienates China and Russia, both of which are critical in dealing with Iran, would be a Pyrrhic victory.

By contrast, working with Putin could pay off at the United Nations Security Council, where Russia's reflexive opposition to American initiatives since the 2011 Nato offensive in Libya has stymied many of Washington's diplomatic efforts. It could also limit Iran's role in Syria and help frustrate Iran's nuclear ambitions.

The collapse of Assad's government wouldn't mean the end of Syria's troubles. It's not only when he leaves power that matters, but how.

It's worth recalling that violence in Iraq claimed approximately 100,000 lives after Saddam Hussein fell. And a total collapse of the government and military Syria, like that engineered by President George W. Bush in Iraq, would most likely lead to further unrest and bloodshed and could produce another terrorist sanctuary like that which existed in Afghanistan in

the 1990s. (That country's growing instability in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union's military withdrawal in 1988-9 -- when America and its allies opted to pursue total military victory and turned down Mikhail S. Gorbachev's proposals for power-sharing talks -- helped pave the way for 9/11.)

Avoiding an Iraqi-style security vacuum or an Afghan-style terrorist haven must be a key American goal in post-Assad Syria. And Russia can help, if the Obama administration is prepared to rethink its approach to the crisis.

The United States has wisely called for China's and Russia's cooperation. However, the administration appears to define "working together" as giving Russia the opportunity to adopt American positions and implement American policies without any meaningful input -- which alienates the Kremlin.

Despite its desire to avoid continuing instability and bloodshed in Syria, the Obama administration so far hasn't been prepared to take the next logical step: seeking a negotiated solution to end the fighting. It seems to prefer the idea of a complete military and political triumph for the rebels.

But do American officials really believe that the Syrian opposition is sufficiently well organised to assume

full responsibility for governing? Or that the Free Syrian Army can establish security across the country? And how would the United States stop sectarian reprisals with no troops and limited leverage -- or prevent those reprisals from producing a new spiral of killing?

America will also have to contend with the influence of Saudi Arabia and Qatar in a post-Assad Syria. Both countries have a much better understanding of Syria and its politics, as well as ties to rebel commanders there, including some that Washington considers terrorists.

A negotiated solution, with Russia's help, could help address many of these challenges. As Assad's position has weakened and his tactics have become more brutal, Russian officials have begun privately to refer to Syria's leader as "a butcher" and acknowledge that he must go. America could win Russia's support for Assad's departure, so long as it was not a precondition but rather a product of the early stages of negotiations.

Removing Assad and laying the groundwork for a stable Syria would require a deal with some members of the existing government and parts of Syria's military that would preserve some government institutions -- at least during a transitional period -- and protect the Alawites and others

groups that have backed Assad.

Russia would most likely support a process that retained some less odious officials in order to sell it to Assad's supporters, including die-hards in the Syrian military. Moscow would probably prefer Syria's vice president, Farouk al-Sharaa, as an interim leader, but informed Russian sources say that the Kremlin would most likely accept a rebel leader who is not an Islamic extremist -- a goal that dovetails with American aims.

Russia may seem an unsavory partner. And Moscow's motivations for a negotiated transition are hardly altruistic: maintaining military and commercial contacts in Syria, winning prestige by being part of the solution to a major international crisis and avoiding domestic fallout from violence in a country that is home to roughly 30,000 Russian citizens would all benefit the Kremlin. But a stable Syria is in America's interest, too.

The Obama administration therefore faces a stark choice. It can go for a knockout or opt for a brokered peace that brings greater stability.

Those who argue for helping the rebels achieve a complete triumph should remember that the next chapter could look a lot like Iraq or Afghanistan.

A negotiated solution, with Russian cooperation, would ultimately produce an outcome that better serves America's long-term security interests -- and saves more Syrian lives.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 26

1792 The final trial of Louis XVI of France begins in Paris, France.

1799 Four thousand people attend George Washington's funeral where Henry Lee declares him as "first in war, first in peace and first in the hearts of his countrymen."

1825 Advocates of liberalism in Russia rise up against Tsar Nicholas I and are put down in the Decembrist Revolt in St. Petersburg.

1898 Marie and Pierre Curie announce the isolation of Radium.