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Much Ado about Army

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More than six years ago, the then chief adviser Iajuddin Ahmed, who was also the President holding the defence portfolio, suddenly ordered army deployment on December 9, 2006 to maintain law and order.

In fact it was the BNP, tired of the Awami League's shifting demands, that forced Iajuddin to deploy the army "to aid civil administration" and pre-empt the opposition's planned sit-in the next day. Iajuddin had also taken the decision of army deployment on November 12 the same year as the AL-led alliance was waging street agitations. But that decision was reversed at the last minute when the advisers baulked at not being consulted and over the way the deployment was ordered.

But he did not reverse the decision he took the second time in December. That unilateral decision irked advisors of the caretaker government and finally four of them resigned. The army deployment however could not improve the situation.

At one stage, the AL-led alliance quit the polls and announced to resist the one-sided election. The BNP-led alliance was desperate to have had the polls held. The caretaker government-led by Iajuddin was moving as per the BNP's dictums. Even the army was given more power to maintain law and order for smoothly holding the polls scheduled for January 22, 2007.

The BNP might have felt encouraged considering the February 15, 1996 one-sided parliamentary polls when the army played a significant role in maintaining law and order to hold the election amid the boycott of all other major political parties. At that time the BNP was in power.

But over the years, the situation has changed a lot, a fact that the BNP leadership could not understand in 2006. The political situation became more violent in the January of 2007. And the Army did not want to be a part of the conflict between the two rival political parties. Rather, they intervened into the situation and forced the then President Iajuddin to resign as the chief adviser and to declare the state of emergency in order to save the country from the lurking disaster.

After more than six years, the political situation appears to have changed little. The election time non-partisan caretaker government system was scrapped by the AL-led government. That has made the political situation volatile. And all the signs suggest that the situation will become more volatile in the days ahead of the parliamentary polls supposed to be held at the end of this year.

The BNP-led alliance has been reiterating that they would boycott and resist the election if it is held under the AL-led government. The AL-led government has been rejecting the BNP's demand for restoration of an election time non-partisan government and is determined to remain in power during the upcoming polls.

Under such a situation, the AL-led government has opted for a strategy different from that of the Iajuddin-led administration. It has decided not to bring the army in the field in the run up to the upcoming parliamentary polls.

In line with the strategy, the LGRD Minister Syed Ashraful Islam, also ruling AL's general secretary, on July 24 at a conference asked deputy commissioners, who usually work as returning officers to conduct the polls, to prepare for the elections without the help of the army.

Ashraf did not say anything about the politics behind his government's strategy. But there is of course politics which the government policymakers know very well.

The LGRD minister however justified his government strategy by citing its success in holding local government polls without the help of the