

Two interim formulas

Seize the window of opportunity

WE now have two prescriptions to resolve the existing political impasse. We thank both the AL and the BNP for coming out with respectable formulas to tide over the current political impasse. Both formulas address the issue of pro tem arrangement that would oversee the conduct of the next parliamentary elections. Admittedly, there is a degree of novelty in Begum Zia's formula.

The two formulas have provided the two parties with an opportunity to engage in discussions, something which till now had seemed extremely remote. We do not want to dilate on the merits and demerits of the two proposals, but cannot emphasise more on the need for the two parties to engage immediately in discussions and use the two formulas as starting points. We have had enough of brinkmanship and irresponsible behaviour from the two.

This is not the time to spilt hairs. We are sure that the imperative of dialogue is not lost on the two parties either. The country has had enough of hostility over the issue of the next parliamentary elections. We can no longer endure another spate of shutdowns and seiges and disruptions in public life. This is an opportunity to deliver the people from a feeling of uncertainty that they have been gripped with so far.

What the AL and BNP must be aware of is that the public hold them responsible for bringing the country to the brink of chaos. The window of opportunity to avert a violent situation must be seized without delay.

Dangerous crossings

Pedestrian awareness key

THE photo story on the recently inaugurated Hanif flyover, more than anything, brings forth the state of road 'unsafety' in our country. Not only do we have some of the highest statistics in terms of road collisions and casualties -- most of them due to negligence and reckless driving -- but the dangers that pedestrians, too, put themselves in is a common sight on the streets. They cross the roads at will, never minding the traffic and pedestrian signals, of which there are too few anyway. Many refuse to use the sidewalks and footover bridges built for pedestrians and would rather walk on and cross the busy streets. It should be mentioned, however, that most footpaths are broken or taken up by vendors, as are many of the overbridges too. The newly-built flyover in question is supposed to be off-limits to pedestrians but, as the photo story shows, they are using it not only at will but in a precarious manner -- jaywalking, transporting goods and even babies!

Pedestrians must be more cautious in the way they use the roads. At the same time, the streets must be made more pedestrian-friendly as well, with more pedestrian crossings, and better avenues for them to use. The traffic police, too, have a duty to guide pedestrians in the right manner, but ultimately, we ourselves must value our

The development dilemma

FAARIA TASIN

THERE are many who believe that increment in foreign aid can be a way to release Bangladesh from the development problems it is arrested inside. Many are aware of interest rates that can accompany such aids which can ultimately lead to an increase in the debt burden of the economy; however, foreign grants- which are devoid of such interest rates, may not help to solve the problem either.

It is undeniable that foreign grants can help with a lot of things like building schools, hospitals, cyclone-shelters, infrastructure and so on. However there is a hidden barrier present here which may be difficult to perceive.

Let us take an example where the government receives \$1 million in foreign grants and builds 10 hospitals. Say each hospital employs 1,000 doctors and nurses implying that this government project employs a total of 10,000 people.

To understand where the problem lies, we first need to understand how the government manages its budget. Broadly speaking, the government divides this into two parts: the revenue (recurrent) budget and the development budget. The revenue budget comprises of the 'reoccurring' expenditures such as wage and salaries. The proportion of this budget remains relatively stable because the government has to pay salaries to the public sector employees year after year. Hence the recurrent budget has its own internal momentum. The development budget on the other hand, is comparatively erratic and its size depends upon project cycles, availability of foreign aid, emergency spending during natural calamities and so on.

When the government decides to build 10 hospitals with foreign grant, it will be coming from the development budget. However, once the project is complete and the grant is exhausted, it has to be transferred to the revenue budget in order to sustain the jobs of 10,000 employees and maintenance of the hospitals.

In order to do that the government every year has to churn out an additional amount of revenue which will suffice the maintenance costs as well the salaries of hospital employees. If the government fails to bear the expenses then the construction of the buildings will be futile and these 10,000 doctors and nurses will be unemployed. In fact, the depreciation costs of the unused buildings and machinery will rise every year.

One way out of this problem is to increase government revenue. A wider tax net and an efficient tax allocation method can help to break down this limitation.

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CTG system: Revisiting the issue

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

IT seems our current opposition politicians and many political analysts are suffering from fading memories of the evolution and functioning of our Caretaker Government (CTG) system over the last few elections. As if businesses were as usual and the current government all on a sudden removed the provision of CTG from the constitution. This was not to attest that the government did the right thing. Referring to the 15th amendment, I wrote a piece entitled, "A self-defeating amendment" (DS, July 26, 2011) in which it was observed: "The prime minister's insistence that the repeal was necessary after the Supreme Court struck down the 13th Amendment to the constitution as illegal is not tenable". However, keeping aside the pretext of the SC verdict, it would be unfair to judge the action of the government ignoring the inherent reasons or context that led the ruling party to go through the much-controversial amendment that gave rise to the current political stalemate.

Just to refresh the memory, the CTG system was introduced in the Constitution as a result of an all-out movement spearheaded by AL itself in 1996 in the aftermath of the Magura bye-election. The first election under the newly enacted constitutional provision was conducted by Justice M. Habibur Rahman. He had to work under a partisan president and unfortunately did not have a smooth sailing in his tenure. His great wisdom saved the day and the election was by and large fair.

Likewise, the election of 1991 under Justice Shahbuddin Ahmed was equally credible despite the stewardship of Justice Rouf as CEC, a highly partisan individual.

There was, however, no broad consensus among our citizens in attributing the caretaker administration under Justice Latifur Rahman with the similar connotation of impartiality and neutrality. Although BNP won that election, it probably took careful note from the functioning of the CTG under Justice Latifur Rahman and did not want to leave the appointment of chief of the CTG to natural progression and amended the constitution to induct one of their own men as the chief CTG. So, the current opposition leader's statement that "you did not accept Justice Hasan, we will not accept you", does not hold ground since Justice Hasan was not a candidate of natural progression of the CTG. He was the result of a constitutional manipulation.

What happened at the end was the manifestation of evil designs of the then PM, blatantly violating, not one but three provisions of the constitution, to impose her handpicked President Dr. Iajuddin to self-assume the position of the Chief Adviser. In fact, the political alliance that opposed his assumption of CA displayed their statesmanship by not rejecting him outright; instead they gave him the opportunity to prove his neutrality in creating a

level playing field for the participants of the ensuing election. Contrary to their expectations, he colluded to implement the blue print of his mentor in the infamous, 'Hawa Bhaban'.

The aggrieved political leaders filed a writ petition in the superior court challenging the constitutional legality of Iajuddin's assumption of the office of the CTG, a conventional avenue in any Republic where rule of law and constitution prevail. After due hearings, when the judges were about to deliver their ruling, the Attorney General, personally delivered an order on a plain paper from the Chief Justice staying the delivery of ruling, an unprecedented phenomenon in the country's legal chronicle. So, the essence of the CTG system was wrecked by Iajuddin-led CTG at the behest of nobody else but the current leader of the opposition herself.

To keep history in perspective, it must be stressed that in January 2007, the armed forces of the nation rose to the occasion and prevented the nation from falling in an irreversible catastrophe. The CTG under Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed did a superb job of conducting, with the help of a truly independent and impartial Election Commission, a free and fair election.

Referring back to the PM's address to the nation (excepting for the damaging DMP order) proposing an all-party interim government, given the context as outlined above, it could be attributed as positive, ground breaking and constructive. The BNP in particular does not have any high moral ground to bypass it; rather it must respond positively to evolve a middle ground. As opposed to the dark situation prevailed during Hawa Bahban-dictated Iajuddin government, the current situation is quite reassuring in multiple ways. Firstly, the EC for the first time has been constituted in consultations with all the major stakeholders. Its members have conducted five thousand or so elections with utmost neutrality and fairness. The EC might not have been immune from criticisms, but probably not for partisan reasons. Secondly, no CEC ever appointed by any AL governments had to leave in disgrace and the current one is not expected to be any different. Thirdly, every voter has a national ID card and the voter list does not contain 12 million or so fake voters. Fourthly, excepting the Premiership, there is a strong likelihood that the main opposition might bargain for a couple of important ministerial portfolios that could be strong deterrent for any potential fixing of the election results. Lastly, given the free print and electronic media in the country, bulk of which are not so sympathetic to the government, it would be impossible to hold a Magura or a Dhaka-10 type of elections.

Historically, it might have been true that no fair election took place under a partisan government. But here again, AL was never been a part of that history.

The writer is the Convenor of the Canadian Committee for Human Rights and Democracy in Bangladesh.

PRAFUL BIDWAI
COLUMN



PRAFUL BIDWAI

Narendra Modi's hate-filled bid for power, rising threat from communalism, growing exposure of crime-politics links, and the December 16 rape, which underscore society's ugly pathologies.

The negative perception is reinforced by the economic slowdown and the steeply falling rupee. With manufacturing shrinking, India is no longer seen as a fast-industrialising nation. Nor is she the preferred destination of foreign direct investment, as she was only a year ago.

The rudest shock, however, comes from India's so-far-unsuccessful bid to secure one of the 10 non-permanent seats for 2020-21 on the United Nations Security Council from the Asian quota.

India threw its hat in the ring for a permanent Council seat with Germany, Japan and Brazil (G-4). But it's now hard for India to get support even for a temporary seat. Vietnam, a candidate for the Asian-quota seat, wants India to stand down if it wants Vietnam's support for the G-4. Or else, India will face a contest in 2019.

India held a two-year Council seat until last December, and celebrated its victory in 2010 as a "big day for diplomacy" (the-then foreign minister S.M. Krishna) and a "monumental" triumph.

In reality, India won just one more vote than tiny Colombia despite a furiously energetic campaign in which Krishna spoke to 123 foreign ministers, and India got Kazakhstan to withdraw its candidature.

An India-Vietnam contest would set back their bilateral relations. They see a common adversary in China: India, because of its long-term rivalry with China and its Look East policy, and Vietnam because of China's territorial claims on it.

Equally fraught would be the 2020 election, in which Afghanistan wants its first non-permanent seat. India, which seeks influence in Afghanistan after US withdrawal in 2014, will be hard put to deny it this. India also wants to get Afghanistan's nascent democratic institutions international legitimisation.

When the Asian-seat election comes up yet again in 2021, the United Arab Emirates will be a candidate. Opposing the UAE, where millions of Indians work, would be tough. Nor can India in 2022 easily oppose Mongolia, which it is cultivating strategically. 2023's likely contender is Pakistan, which backed India in 2010.

Thus, India probably won't get back into the Council for a decade-plus without a contest. India's experience in fighting Council elections isn't happy. When it last contested, in 1996, Japan humiliated it 142-to-40.

So much for former Indian UN ambassador Hardeep Puri's earlier boast: "We are entering the Security Council ... after a gap of 19 years...we have no intentions of leaving the Security Council ... Before we complete our two-year term we will be a permanent member..."!

The G-4 face tough opposition from the "Coffee

India's troubled Security Council bid

Club" comprising Pakistan, Italy, Spain, South Korea, Mexico and others. China is allergic to Japan's permanent-seat bid and will probably resist India's till the very end. So support for India from the US, France, Britain and Russia won't ensure the absence of a veto.

India's Council bid is driven by a search for (false) prestige, not a transformative universal agenda. In 2011-12, India offered no forward-looking perspective, nor even resistance to the dominant powers in the Council.

India failed to prevent the "responsibility to protect" paragraph enabling attacks on Libya, with disastrous consequences. India failed to raise major issues such as reform of the International Financial Institutions, the global economic crisis, and North-South inequalities.

To boost its power, India has joined numerous alliances/regional groupings, including BASIC (Brazil-South Africa-India-China) in the climate negotiations, IBSA (India-Brazil-South Africa) for South-South cooperation, and BRICS (Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa), and others.

These "force multipliers" haven't performed to expectation. BASIC was created mainly to ward off pressure from the developed countries most responsible for causing climate change. But this substantially weakened the developing-country Group-of-77, of which India was a leading member.

At the Durban climate conference (2011), the developed countries and many poor developing countries ganged up against BASIC. Since then, South Africa has broken ranks with BASIC on the legal form of a new climate agreement to be negotiated by 2015.

BRICS comprises five of the world's fastest-growing economies, with 40% of its population, 27% of its purchasing-power GDP, 15% of trade and two-fifths of foreign currency reserves. But it has failed to translate its clout into radical reform of the global economy.

Take the global Great Recession. Instead of challenging neoliberalism, and demanding a sea-change in the world financial system, BRICS accepted Western-dictated (non)-solutions, which perpetuate corporate power, speculation and inequality, and impose harsh "austerity" upon working people.

During the 2010 World Bank debate, ostensibly to promote voting-power "parity" between developing and developed countries, BRICS went along with cosmetic changes.

The low-income countries' vote-share in the Bank only rose marginally from 34.67% to 38.38%, leaving over 60% to the rich. Post-"reform", China's share (3.23%) remains smaller than France or Britain's (4.20%), and Brazil's lower than the Netherlands.'

These failures partly explain the growing disenchantment with India among concerned citizens and underprivileged people.

India still can play a worthy global role if it returns to the agendas of a just economic and political world order, becomes an advocate-campaigner for the world's subjugated and dispossessed people, upholds non-military dispute resolution, and champions elimination of mass-destruction weapons.

But this means giving up the addiction to power projection by military means, abandoning delusions about India's assured place at the world's High Table, urgently improving relations with neighbours as a high priority, and articulating a humane, compassionate global vision.

But can India's elite, which does just the opposite domestically, invest India's global power with such universal purpose?

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LETTERS

The 'Poly-Glu' lady

Japanese PM's praise of our women and calling them 'base of the pyramid' in development in Bangladesh in his UN speech was published in a local English daily on 1st October. It was indeed a valued recognition of our womenfolk. I may possibly not be wrong in feeling that our womenfolk are the most accomplished among the women of Muslim countries of the world.

The Japanese PM's remark was based on the performance of Nilufa Yeasmin, the "Poly-Glu Lady", for her achievements in familiarising this "Glu" which cleans turbid water easily. Frankly speaking, this is the first occasion that I have heard about this "Poly Glu." Neither have I come across anything about it in any of our local English dailies that I read regularly. I would request our dailies to carry reports on it. I believe, if the material is easily available, then many people in Dhaka as well as other cities and towns can also use it. I wonder if any NGOs are aware about this or use it to clean water in rural areas.

Engr. S. A. Mansoor
Dhaka

Development work must continue

The present government has taken various development initiatives. Producing energy, eradicating illiteracy, easing traffic congestions, providing proper utility services, upgrading communications system are some of them. We want these development works to continue no matter which party wins the next election or runs the country.

Samiul Raijul
Bangladesh University of Textiles, Dhaka

"The Master calls time"

The above titled news was published in your daily on October 11. Sachin Tendulkar's aggregate in 7 innings in India's last Test series against Australia was merely 192, "boasting" of a meagre average of 32 and a single half century only! Just prior to it, Sachin contributed 112 runs from 6 Test innings, averaging 18.66, against England! Sachin aggregated 63 runs from 3 innings against New Zealand, averaging 21! If the last 20 Test innings of Sachin are taken into consideration, it would get scandalously exposed that the "god" had aggregated merely 428 runs at an average of 22.52! Still far from sacking him from the team, the combination of selectors, BCCI mandarins and "pundits" were shamelessly supporting the case of Sachin! In contrast, despite reigning as India's most successful Test batsman during the period between late 2006 and mid 2008 and averaging a brilliant 54 against Australia in the 2008 home series and scoring a match-winning innings of 85 in the last Test of the series at Nagpur, the "old" Sourav Ganguly, aged 36, was brutally forced to call it a day to infuse "new blood" in the team! In contrast, just witness how the failure "kid" of 40 years was being pampered in the most atrocious fashion possible! Was Sachin Tendulkar greater than the team, nation and the game as a whole?

Kajal Chatterjee
Kolkata, India

Comments on news report, "This will not end stalemate," published on October 19, 2013

Nasirullah Mridha, USA

Last time when BNP was in power, AL declined to accept the very same proposal.

MH Khan

BNP is against the proposal because they are not interested in election; they are interested in grabbing power.

Ahnaf

They are interested in election but not election by AL.

Molla A. Latif

This should at least open a gate to step in for an end to the stalemate created intentionally which could very well be avoided if BNP had opposed the amendment to the constitution without the provision of the CTG. Now if it is not CTG, let it be an all-party government in the interest of the country and the people.

S M Iftekhar Ahmed

As long as BNP thinks rationally and takes a concrete decision and avoids the politics of confrontation instead of listening to the ridiculous ideas of Jammat, this might actually work in their favour because people seem to be frustrated with the incumbent government and are looking for a change.

"JS can sit until polls schedule announced" (October 14, 2013)

Sadsada

For heaven's sake, if our PM and opposition leader think so dearly of our people, they should not let their infighting result in a civil war.

Molla A. Latif

But the leader of the opposition plans to bring the Doom's Day after 25th. Oct. 2013!!

Shahin Huq

Dear PM, your words are law in today's Bangladesh. You may not need to worry about the president's intervention. You are enough!