

Incongruous cabinet

PM's logic belied

IT seems that the PM is doling out ministership and post of advisors as largesse to any political party leader who is willing to join the Hasina bandwagon. This is an insult to the stature that a ministerial post carries, and violates the very spirit of a poll-time government. Certainly, credentials of some of the new inductees are questionable.

Not only is the size of the cabinet incompatible with the stated tasks of routine work and overseeing the election, induction of 11 advisors, all unelected persons, have negated the very logic Sheikh Hasina applied in discarding the CTG system. And whereas, under a CTG there were eleven persons in all, there are now thirty nine to do the same job.

The AL chief's action is an enticement, and perhaps even bait for these parties to participate in the general election, with the purpose of thwarting the BNP's attempt to boycott the same. This is a blatant misuse of not only constitutional proviso but also of state facilities to serve the political ends of the party. By doing so Sheikh Hasina may not have violated the letter of the Constitution but she has certainly abused its spirit.

We are constrained to say that the current political dispensation, with 28 ministers and 11 advisors, has nothing to do with ideology or principles or even greater national interest.

We deplore the misuse of the poll-time government perks and facilities to gain political advantage. This will certainly not go down well with the highly politically astute public.

Violence against women

Needs collective effort to contain

WE observed the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women on November, 25. Violence against women in different tiers of society in Bangladesh has been an age old issue. Much work has been done to combat the menace but there is a lot more to accomplish as this is a behavioral change issue which needs time to rectify.

Besides the traditional views of women and their role in society, there are other factors which contribute negatively towards women's situation. For example, there is lack of a strong legal mechanism which protects women against violation of their rights. While there are laws, most often they do not get enforced. Impunity provides incentive for more violence and, sadly, law often does not side with women in Bangladesh. There is also lack of women's shelters and support system for those who fall victim to violence and abuse.

Violence is committed towards women in all sections of society, from the rich to poor. Some we see with our bare eyes, some we don't. Young wives, who cannot give dowry to their husbands and domestic help often become victims of violence. We read about them in the papers but we cannot think of too many cases where the violators were convicted or got duly punished. Women have been murdered and been victims of acid attacks time and time again. Violence against anyone is a crime and the more we accept it the further we stray from being

Biting the hand that feeds

SHAHRIAR FEROZE

WE have yet again shown our true colours, and this time by attacking the motorcade carrying a group of Spanish RMG buyers. It's the timing of the grisly incident that is of grave concern. Just when two groups of retailers -- one dominated by American companies, the other by European brands -- announced on last Wednesday that they had agreed on joint inspection standards for thousands of garment factories in Bangladesh as part of their effort to improve workplace safety, came the news of the attack. Surprisingly, no case was filed.

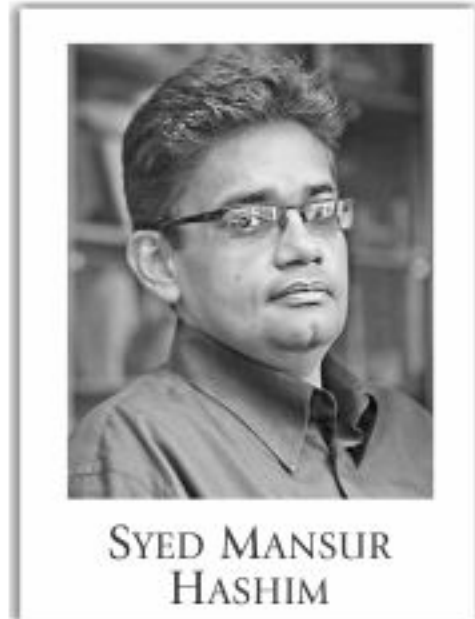
The mystery behind the attack is more 'why' than 'who-had-done-it'. It seems that political vandalism has found new targets too: foreigners. The 'new targets' were found less than a month ago during a spate of hartals in August. With our RMG exports on the rise despite all odds the attack will be a big blow to our country's image, since, negative reports concerning the incident will be seriously taken by the buyers.

Relating to RMG export we are today at an important juncture where the global focus is set on improving ethical and safety codes of our garment production practices through forums, seminars and conferences being held across the world. The attack on Spanish buyers will worsen Bangladesh's already tarnished RMG-perception worldwide. Baffling was the role of our Law and security enforcement agencies. You may want to know why since it was an isolated and unexpected occurrence. Given the fact our current political imbroglio against the backdrop of a looming global skepticism in manufacturing RMG goods the security agencies should have introduced a set of preventive measures for all foreigners. In the light of the recent attack the apparel makers have come up with demands for providing them security. We pray their demand is met.

We were appalled to learn that a single attack shattered not only a factory by the name of Wisdom attires but cancelled orders worth millions of US dollars. The supply orders are likely to be placed with any of our competitor countries, but it's the manufacturer who will have to bear the brunt of loss in export earnings. If we fail to punish the Shibir activists, then we will be held guilty to our conscience. Immediate and far-reaching measures should be taken to ensure the safety of foreigners not only functioning within the RMG sector but those residing within the country in general.

The writer is Current Affairs Analyst, The Daily Star.

Coming out of the cold



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

S MILES all around for the Iranians at Geneva as it signed a historic deal with the West to limit its nuclear programme; gloom all around for policymakers in Tel Aviv. That basically sums up the situation. But for Iran, reeling under the pressure of an all-pervasive noose around the neck with UN-backed sanctions that was all but crippling the economy and causing massive hardship to common Iranian folk, there was little to do but face realities on the ground. That coupled with a belligerent Netanyahu on the war path could perhaps have been deciding factors for the Iranian leadership.

The road ahead, more precisely, adhering to the 6-month road map will decide whether Iran will be allowed back in from the cold. As per the roadmap, Iran is committed to halt the enrichment of uranium above 5 per cent. Of the many commitments made by Iran in the deal in Geneva comes the promise to destroy its uranium stockpile that has been enriched to near-20%. Tehran is committed to not install any further centrifuges, which are basically machinery used in the enrichment process. Equally important is the agreement on rendering 75% of centrifuges installed in Natanz and Fordow enrichment useless. However, by far the most important development is that Iran will not produce any plutonium at the Arak facility which has a heavy-water reactor. All these and other conditions met by Iran will be overseen by IAEA inspectors who will have full access to nuclear facilities on a daily basis.

In return for good faith by Tehran, Iran will get "limited, temporary, targeted, and reversible [sanctions] relief". That and a host of other concessions by the major powers will provided Iran with a much needed breather after years of crippling sanctions. The lifting of sanctions on petrochemical exports, trade, and precious metals will mean more money to buy products for the local market. Furthermore, Iranians get back access to their oil revenues that have been frozen in various countries like China, South Korea, Turkey, Japan and India -- all Iranian oil-importing nations. These funds amount to more than US\$4 billion, money desperately needed by Iran. All in all, Iran will get sanction relief of around \$7 billion. Lifting of sanctions mean resumption of normal banking operations, leading to a resumption of trade whereby Iran can import and export as other countries do. The deal is the result of six months of intensive negotiations with the Tehran government by a consortium popularly known as the P5+1, i.e. United States, Russia, Britain, Germany, France and China.

It is not surprising to see that the agreement has been trashed by Netanyahu's right-of-centre government in Jerusalem. Terming the agreement as a 'historic mistake', Prime Minister Netanyahu has been sticking to his guns, at

least in the public eye, Israel's right to not allow take any steps necessary to neutralise Iran's nuclear capability. It is not altogether difficult to understand why the Israeli PM finds himself between a rock and a hard place. Given that he has staked his premiership on the brinkmanship with Iran, a country which now has undertaken, a 'historic' step to step away from acquiring a nuclear capability. This latest diplomatic initiative which has resulted in a concrete deal between the world's powers and Iran could prove to be game-changer for Israel's domestic politics. According to Yoel Guzansky, former head of the Iran desk in the prime minister's office, presently research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv: "International legitimacy for a unilateral Israeli attack is reduced significantly. The international community endorses this deal, and so Israel will find it really hard to use military power." Belligerent talk by the Israeli PM is misplaced at this juncture and Israel-US diplomatic relations has hit a new low.

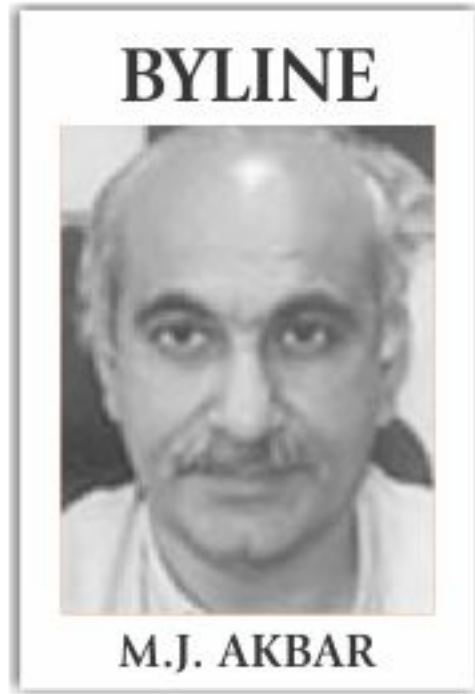


PM Netanyahu would be wise to step away from the war path at this point in time. Any unilateral military action by Israel would discredit the government.

It is no secret that not all Gulf nations are particularly happy with the agreement. Iran bereft of a nuclear capability is still deemed a threat by the smaller states that make up the GCC. Between Israel and Iran, the latter is viewed as the greater enemy not necessarily because Iran possesses large conventional forces, but the fact that Iran's leadership is Shia-led, whereas the Gulf countries are Sunni-led, many with large Shia-majority populations. Given that the Mid-East has been spared the possibility of yet another gulf war brings much relief not just to the region but to the world at large. PM Netanyahu would be wise to step away from the war path at this point in time. Any unilateral military action by Israel would discredit the government, especially since the "threat" has now been contained. It is ironic that Netanyahu is so enthusiastic about neutralising any purported nuclear capability of any Mid-East nation, especially when it is widely suspected that Israel has had a nuclear first strike capability since the late '60s.

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Out of Turn



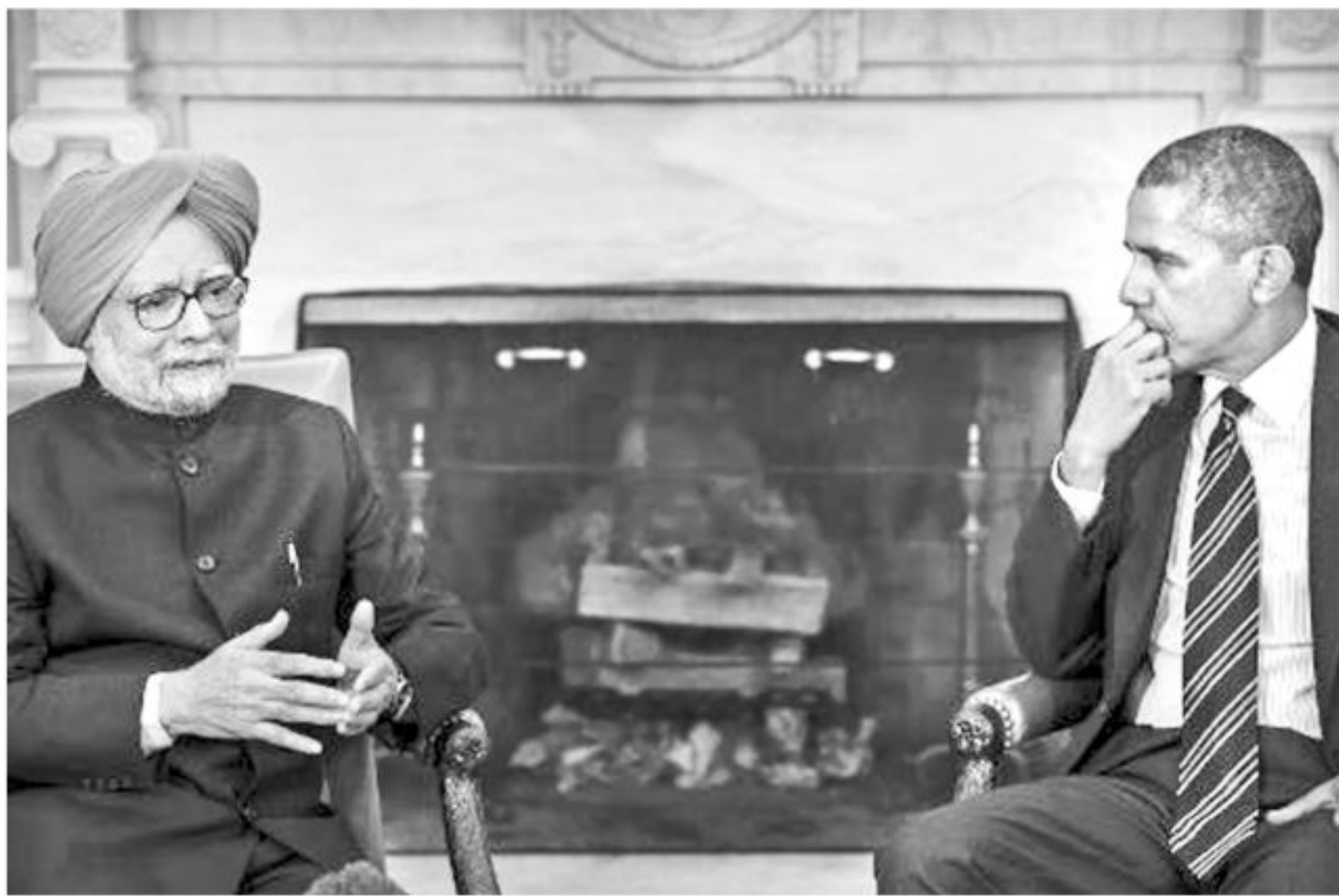
BYLINE

M.J. AKBAR

A second term in office is dangerous if there is no third term. It is like entering a casino with plastic money. A Prime Minister or President has no personal stake in the game. There is of course the duty towards good governance, and national interest, but that fire which stokes a leader's instincts, has become ash. Politics is a human business, and human beings need the zeal inspired by ambition. Only saints are content with moral purpose alone, and saints do not win elections.

The two largest democracies of the world, India and America, are both suffering from the second-term syndrome. Washington worries about the strange aloofness that has descended upon Barack Obama, and the indifference that is driving his signature decisions into disrepair.

Obama has not become arrogant; he was arrogant to start with. He is probably just bored. His great battles were



over with his re-election, and he does not quite know how to handle the meandering journey through a downward swamp. A quagmire oozing with the pride of victory, and heavy with the drudge of complacency, is an invitation to mistakes, errors of judgement, and indifference to consequence.

Dr Manmohan Singh was not blocked by India's Constitution; he could have sought a third term. He was stymied by the jump-start ambitions of Rahul Gandhi, the heir who is sometimes here, sometimes there, and often nowhere. Dr Singh was, in essence, given the responsibility of creating the conditions that would elect Rahul Gandhi as the next Prime Minister. He did his best. But a mentor cannot help a protégé beyond a very limited point. If you want the medal, you have to do the heavy lifting yourself.

But for Dr Singh and Obama, history beckons. Both, perhaps wearied by the complicated demands of an often fruitless domestic agenda, sought a place in the books through an audacious gamble in foreign policy. Dr Singh attempted nothing less than peace with Pakistan, an objective that has eluded visionary Prime Ministers like Jawaharlal Nehru and Atal Behari Vajpayee. Like them, Dr

Singh believed that goodwill was good enough. It never is.

India and Pakistan are locked not in a geographical dispute, but in an ideological war over the present and future of the Indian subcontinent. Pakistan believes in the two-nation theory, conceived in the conviction that Hindus and Muslims cannot co-operate as equals.

That epic delusion slips repeatedly into its equations with India. Dr Singh began his second term dramatically, with a gesture to Pakistan that was as unprecedented as it was unwarranted, conceding the possibility of Indian involvement in Baluchistan. He got no return on such risky investment. Islamabad continues to provide pelf and protection to a mastermind of the Mumbai terror attack, Hafiz Syed, who gets government security at his public rallies where the main theme is aggression against India. But Dr Singh was also stumped by his own Congress party, which became apprehensive that Rahul Gandhi might have to suffer any backlash within Indian public opinion.

Over the last four decades, Iran has become to America what Pakistan is to India. Obama is in his Nixon moment. Richard Nixon recognized that history would be kinder to him than journalism if he could reverse the absurdity of America's stagnant attitude towards Maoist China. His China manoeuvre shifted the balance of economic and strategic power in ways neither Nixon nor Mao could have foreseen when they cracked the glacier in 1970.

Obama wants an equally transformative coup in America's relations with Iran, a regional power that is far more durable than its detractors thought. If the deal survives the acid attacks inevitable along the long road ahead, the strategic map of Asia will be altered beyond recognition, and in ways that no one has yet begun to articulate. From Delhi's perspective, America's spatial dependence on Pakistan will weaken, disturbing a basic foundation of the America-Pakistan relationship. Iran will

also be a more reliable partner than Pakistan in the continuing confrontation against militias of the Sunni Jihad, who believe that after defeating the Soviet Union in Afghanistan they have now delivered a death blow to the mighty Americans. They want to turn Afghanistan and Pakistan into the epicentre of an offensive against India, and China, which has absorbed Muslim Sinkiang into its territory. 2014, when most American troops return home, is not an end but only another beginning.

But Obama has a problem: every Nixon needs a Henry Kissinger. The birth of any new era requires a midwife with an exceptional grasp of the world order, the imagination to conduct negotiations with a tough enemy, and the blessed virtue of silence. This was Dr Singh's dilemma as well.

A casino has its rules. If you are not playing for money, you can always lose something more precious. Your reputation.

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.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Minimum wage for garment workers

BDT 5,300 has been finalised as the minimum wage for garment workers with yearly 5% increment. Also, an apprentice will be paid minimum TK 4,180.

If we look closely we can find some flaws that will actually make the whole effort vague. Here is why:

1. A new entrant will receive minimum TK 4,180 which is less than the wage of non-new entrants. That means it will open the door for the garment owners to oppress the labourers in a new way. First, they would terminate existing labourers and then re-hire them as new entrants. The poor laborers will fall prey to the new system of oppression.

2. The 5% yearly increment will never be enough to adjust to the trend of 7.8%-8% yearly inflation rate. The living standard will never improve as a result of this inflation gap. The result: again we will see unrest in the sector.

In order to rectify this error, govt. can introduce a new law that if a person gains 2000 hours of experience in the industry, no owner can treat her as apprentice anymore. Yearly increment should be fixed at inflation rate or at least not less than 85% of it.

We really want an end to the wage war in the garment industry once and for all.

Syed Kolloi
Accountant, MBA
Australia

Political parties instigate sectarian violence

We have seen an increase in sectarian violence in Bangladesh in last few years: first in the hill tracts and then sporadically in different places of the country. We don't want to be ruled by a party like BJP which instigates sectarian violence in India. We don't want ethnic minorities in Bangladesh to suffer because of their religious beliefs.

What I believe is such attacks have not been committed by the miscreants on their own without green signal from political parties. We hardly see any of the top leaders getting punished for their crimes committed against the religious minorities.

They remain behind the scene. For instance, we recently saw a picture in TDS in which one of the known perpetrators of the recent attack on Hindu minorities in Pabna was seen beside the state minister for home affairs in a procession, and we don't know if that person has been arrested after the report was published. I urge the politicians not to choose the path of destruction.

Shoaib Ahmed Chowdhury
Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Ashraf, Fakhru 'talk in secret', " published on November 24, 2013

Salim Ullah

People have been held hostage by the two parties. How long will this drama continue at the cost of immeasurable sufferings of the people?

007ISI

Why not arrange an open debate like that in America?

Zman7

Consider country's interest first, please. What the opposition is doing in the name of hartal is nothing but politics of violence, death and destruction of unprecedented scale. It's high time they stopped such (Quasi)-terrorist acts and took initiative to sit with the government and discuss how to arrange a free and fair election.

Akm Bari

Why secret? Talk publicly so that people can know the real discussion between these two secretary generals.

"AL opts to be generous" (November 24, 2013)

Ash C.

It still astonishes me -- although it's no longer a secret -- that the game plan to remain in power was made way before 2008 election with 'Vision 2021' digital Bangladesh with active assistance from an external force with their collaborators in Bangladesh.

Samih34

What a shame! These (democratic?) political parties planned to hold election in an empty field so that they win the election! Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will return after performing Umrah and seeking God's blessings. Earnestly hope that the Umrah works for her and she realises the ground reality and acts as per the will of the people.

Saleh Tanveer

The government believes, perhaps with good reasons, that if you just dole out goodies to the other party leaders, you can keep yourselves in power, regardless of how people feel.

Ben10

No amount of unity, planning and maths can save the lies. The fortresses of falsehood will fall at the slightest wind of truth and justice.