

The political impasse can end

MANZOOR AHMED

EXHORTATION to the contending political camps to take a moral high ground, stop horrendous violence in the name of democracy, not punish the public and sit down for a dialogue is clearly falling on deaf ears. Both sides insist on taking a hard line. Even Machiavellian calculation calls for compromise to achieve the goal. The Awami League (AL)-led coalition has the advantage of incumbency. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina should not squander her bargaining chips.

Doubts about the political legitimacy of 2014 polls persist, though its juridical necessity is widely accepted. More so because Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had anticipated as much, when she categorically said on December 19, 2013 that after the 10th Parliament was elected to meet the constitutional necessity, a dialogue would be initiated to discuss the electoral process for the 11th Parliament. But the AL coalition promptly disowned its promise and claimed the right to stay in power for the full term of five years.

AL in its political calculation ignored the anatomy of the body politics of the country. Since 1990, after the military regime was overthrown by a public upheaval, various election results showed that roughly one-third of the electorate remained steadfastly loyal to AL, another third owed their allegiance to the other camp comprising mostly the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e Islami (Jamaat). Approximately a third stayed in the middle exercising their choice in each election and thus became the "king-makers." Persuading a segment of the middle-roaders became the key to winning the numbers to form the government.

Despite Begum Khaleda Zia being virtually confined to her Gulshan office and many of her senior and middle order leaders in custody, widespread violence, loss of life, destruction and disruption continue in the country. It is a travesty to claim, as the ruling camp claims, that the problem is only terrorism, not a political impasse.

The 2014 election for the 10th Parliament breached the de facto rules of the game because BNP-Jamaat supporters and, for that matter, the majority of others failed to exercise their polling rights. The perception of unfairness and lack of moral legitimacy of 2014 election in the country and abroad cannot be wished away. This is why it was important to handle the post-election situation with finesse instead of relying on bluster and amnesia about the promise of after-polls dialogue.

The concerns of AL about the consequences for the country of BNP-Jamaat regaining power are shared by many of the non-partisan middle-roaders. They recall the Hawa Bhaban-led diarchy in government, kick-back scams run from high places, the shenanigans of collusion with Pakistani intelligence to supply arms to anti-Indian insurgents, patronization of religious terrorists like Bangla Bhai and attacks against the Hindu minorities.

The painful symbolism of the Bangladesh flag put on the flag-mast of ministerial vehicles of Jamaat bigwigs in the

BNP-led government has not been forgotten. It is also remembered how the BNP-government sabotaged and discredited the caretaker system, which they now vouch for, and brought on the one-eleven intervention in 2006.

This historical backdrop deals a strong hand to the AL coalition. The coalition has to play it with finesse and offer a dialogue to the opposition, but its real target has to be the middle-of-the-road citizens. Jamaat is an albatross around the BNP neck, and this alliance may miscalculate again and continue taking a hard line.

A reasonable dual-track approach by the government of dealing with terrorist actions sternly under law and offering a dialogue about the electoral process as well as strengthening democratic institutions and conduct within the government and the political parties will go down well with the middle-roaders. The benefits will rebound on the ruling coalition. It has to indicate, however, the willingness to go for a pre-term election without setting a time line, if a reasonable conclusion is reached through the dialogue.

The ruling coalition could designate a high-level team to meet an opposition team without pre-conditions to discuss the present situation and consider the way forward. A topic would be the ground rules for public assemblies, protests and even calling a hartal, but not enforcing it with coercion and violence.

The government needs to be reticent and civil about castigating the opposition and attacking personally the political opponents, even if the opposition does not live by such restraints. The prime minister should have a designated spokesperson to make political statements and respond to opposition remarks.

The ministers of home affairs and law should speak about the state of law and order with professionalism. Other ministers and functionaries should stick to their own areas of work and cease and desist from disparaging comments about the opposition. Members of Parliament have to be brought under discipline about not mixing up personal and public business, and their role in serving and protecting public interest. A dose of civility and modesty in political exchanges will be appreciated by the majority of the citizenry.

The government would do well to rein-in the student and youth wings of the party and prevent their criminal and extortionist activities on and around campus, offering the full support of law-enforcers to prevent and punish criminality. Such a unilateral step will open the door to do the same regarding the student and youth wings of the opposition. Benefits of shunning dependence on muscle power far outweigh any presumed political advantage.

These ideas are not novel. The point underscored here is that the ruling coalition can take these steps unilaterally, seize the moral high ground, and show the citizenry its concern to spare the nation the agony of the present impasse. Even if the opposition does not respond fully, the coalition stands to gain and would be rewarded whenever the polls take place.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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So much for coming to power!

On one hand the BNP is talking about 'free and fair' elections to uphold democracy and on the other it has held the country hostage with its continuous hartal and blockade programmes. Hundreds of people have been burnt and at least 30 people have died so far. It is simply unacceptable that children, who are supposed to be our future leaders, cannot even go to school. Important examinations are being cancelled. Despite being aware of people's sufferings, the opposition declared: "Blockade to Continue". During the last six years of the AL's rule, the nation has made remarkable progress in many fields. Even people who have visited the country after many years have noticed the change. I just want to say one thing -- even if the elections are held again, I will not vote for them.

Aminur Rahim
New DOHS, Mohakhali, Dhaka

Punishment of perpetrators

In going through your editorial of January 23rd about the punishment for "alleged perpetrators", I have noted what you say about how there should be due process of law in dealing with them. This does not address what should be done to prevent such incidents from occurring in the first place. It's all very well to "carry out thorough and impartial investigations" into these incidents. A glance at your newspaper's coverage in recent days will show the dreadful horrors being sustained by women, children and others, and we must consider carefully how this can be stopped, not simply investigate and punish culprits who perhaps may never be traced.

In particular I draw your attention to the last sentence of your editorial: "Law enforcers cannot take the law into their own hands in a democratic and civilised society." I find this statement to be bizarre. If law enforcers must not take the law into their own hands, then who will? They are called law enforcers because that's what they do, enforce the law. We may frown upon vigilantes and others outside of law enforcement agencies, when they try to take the law into their own hands, because we feel that this is a job for law enforcers. When they see human life imperiled they must use deadly force to protect it, whereas you are suggesting that "due process of law" should be followed even to arrest. The due process of law comes into play after the criminal act has been perpetrated. What the government, I believe, is trying to do is to formulate how to deal with the atrocities before they occur. Let us wring our hands a little for the victims, and also try to ensure fair treatment to the offenders.

Syed Hamde Ali
The Nawab Palace
Bogra

As the nation burns...



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Inhuman acts of arson and rampage upon passenger vehicles have taken a heavy toll of innocent lives since early January. In the name of so-called political movement, some quarters are currently out to destabilise democracy and unleash a reign of terror across Bangladesh.

Innocent children, youth, men and women of every class and profession are becoming targets of the murderers. The law enforcement agencies, despite frantic efforts, are practically failing to halt the ongoing anarchy.

A handful of burn care units in urban hospitals are unable to handle the critically injured who are in unbearable physical pain and mental trauma.

The latest episode of political vice has pushed the nation to the brink of darkness.

Frustrated citizens
Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Question over commitment," published on January 23, 2015

S.M. Iftekhar Ahmed
Having no rule about how many times an individual can become prime minister it has become a game of musical chairs as to which of the two ladies will come to power. Unfortunately, no steps have been taken to rectify this grave flaw in the system to prevent the same person from assuming the post of the head of government. And unless something is done, the crisis will continue, because, the integrity and motive of both are questionable and in the end, the nation as a whole will suffer.

Will sanity prevail?

The situation is desperate

WE have editorialized on the current plight of the country many times since the beginning of the month when the nation was revisited by the trauma of blockade and hartal. And we will do so till the two leaders get down from their high horse and, for the sake of the nation, bring to an end the unbearable state we are in.

It is just not on that our political leaders would allow public sufferings to continue, all in the name of the people. We wonder whether the big two parties hear the voices from the streets. Why should the poor pay for what they think is the fight for power between the AL and BNP -- one to go to power at any cost and the other to hold on to it, come what may.

We would like to forcefully reiterate the call by newspaper editors that the violence must stop and there must be dialogue to end the impasse. The commerce minister has acknowledged that impasse exists but we do not think that those in the government who talk about solution-in-a-week actually comprehend the seriousness of the situation.

We would want the government to address the issue of violence and bring it to an end immediately. But that must also be followed up by substantive action to resolve the underlying political issue that is the root cause of the flux we are in today. The BNP for its part must not forget that by perpetrating violence it is people's sympathy to their cause that they are losing, and losing fast.

Fatwas must not violate laws

We welcome the SC judgment

THE Supreme Court on Sunday released the full-judgment in a case regarding fatwa, in which it declared that a fatwa may only be issued by "properly educated persons" on "religious matters" as long as it doesn't violate the existing laws of the land. It further stated that fatwa cannot be coercive, nor can it violate or affect the rights of reputation or dignity of any person.

The full-judgment has come 44 months into the announcement of a short verdict on it, after the apex court endorsed in part two separate appeals filed against the two HC verdicts that had declared all kinds of fatwa and punishment in its name illegal. Although we feel that the full judgment should have been released much earlier, we welcome that the SC has ruled against the imposition of extra-judicial penalties, even if a shalish finds that there was an "offence."

Furthermore, we commend the court's decision that "no punishment, including physical violence and/or mental torture in any form, can be imposed or inflicted on anybody in pursuance of fatwa" and that undue influence in any form is "forbidden".

We hope this judgment, which must be implemented without further ado, will go a long way in reducing violence against women inflicted and/or aggravated by village arbitrations.

We also applaud the lawyers and human rights advocates who have fought a protracted legal battle to safeguard that women's fundamental rights are not violated by arbitrary fatwas imposed by prejudiced and patriarchal elders.

Thoughts on a possible dialogue

A.B.M. NURUL ISLAM

THERE are three main points that can be discussed in a possible dialogue: (i) How the interim government that will conduct a national election can be formed; (ii) When the next election can be held; (iii) A way out of the current bloody turmoil.

Interim government

Let us not try to find eleven persons from the retired judges, professors, etc. because they are not elected by the people. Making them MPs using the parliament goes against the spirit of the apex court's decision when it declared caretaker government illegal.

A better idea came from PM Sheikh Hasina herself prior to the last election, namely, 5 MPs to be nominated by each party (ruling and opposition). It faltered when the PM insisted on heading it.

The dialogue can start using the PM's offer as a basis. Since Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia are also heads of their respective parties, they should not be considered for the position of head of the interim government as it gives the person the opportunity to use the government machinery for party purposes.

The head should be selected from amongst the nominated MPs. Decisions should be taken on majority basis. The head should not have overriding power over majority decisions. An independent MP can be co-opted to fill the position left vacant by the head.

Next election

BNP would like to have the next election as soon as possible while AL would like to continue till 2019. But what do the people want? People enjoyed the relative peace of last one year. Elections are also expensive. I believe the people would like a breathing period of 2-3 years before the next election. I know this will not satisfy AL or BNP. Is there a way out?

Way out

The way out is to have a government of national unity for the next 2-3 years with rotating leadership between the two leaders. This is not a novel idea. Afghanistan adopted it recently.

The Sixth Parliament (1996) had a brief life of 12 days but passed the caretaker government legislation that brought peace to the country. Let the current Parliament pass legislation for the necessary changes to make way for the proposed government of national unity and then dissolve.

Ninety days before the next election the unity government will hand over power to the interim government. Since there will be no Parliament this time to choose MPs to form the interim government, a one-time exception has to be made. Let each party nominate 5 former MPs to create the first interim government.

One may question whether a unity government is possible. "We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow," Lord Palmerstone. That eternal interest in our case is the well-being of the country and its people. Given the will and the determination, "Yes, we can" form a government of national unity. Let good sense prevail.

The writer is a former BAEC and IAEA official.

Importance of Obama's India visit

SYLVIA MISHRA

PRESIDENT Barack Obama's visit to India to attend the Republic Day celebrations is rich in symbolism and has political and diplomatic significance. This is the first time that the president of the United States is the chief guest in India's Republic Day parade. Obama is also the first American president to visit India twice during his tenure. After a period of drift and unpleasantness, the expectations for the bilateral relationship have rapidly risen since the election of a new government in India last May. Both Obama and Prime Minister Narendra Modi have seized the moment to reinvigorate the bilateral ties. If Modi has put America at the very centre of his dynamic foreign policy strategy, Obama appears eager to work with what is undoubtedly a more vigorous and action-oriented government in Delhi. As Obama told an Indian magazine before his arrival in Delhi the "stars are aligned to finally realise" the long shared vision for a deeper partnership.

The visit is expected to galvanise the bilateral relations, embarking on 'fast paced engagement' to elevate Indo-US strategic partnership to the next level. Both the countries have signaled the political will to produce some tangible outcomes from the second summit meeting between the two leaders in less than four months. Four areas -- economic, defence, nuclear and climate change are -- are likely



AFP

to see concrete steps forward during Obama's three-day sojourn in Delhi.

Enhanced economic cooperation

The renewed growth in the US and the launch of long overdue economic reforms in India have set the stage for some significant steps forward in areas relating to economic cooperation, trade and investment. The growing frustration in America about dealing with Indian economic policy making in the second term of the UPA government has given place to hopes about Modi's promise to significantly improve the ease of doing business in India and create conditions for economic growth and foreign direct investment. Recently, the two countries were successful in negotiating an arrangement to address India's concerns about food security in the context of multilateral trade negotiations, reviving the stalled World Trade Organisation (WTO) trade facilitation. It is likely that both the countries would also discuss issues surrounding property rights regime, thereby developing a common framework for addressing their long-standing differences on patent protection. As India and US near \$100 billion in bilateral trade, there have been sustained discussions on both sides to develop a bilateral investment treaty to simultaneously help provide a framework for American investors. The two countries may also explore the prospects for the negotiation of a Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT). There are also ongoing talks of finalising a framework to resolve the cases of transfer pricing

due to differences between tax authorities of both countries. President Obama is also expected to be meeting and discussing with India-US CEOs during his visit.

Extending scope of defence cooperation

It is expected that both the countries would renew the Framework of Defence Cooperation that was signed in 2005 and is due to expire this year. Media reports have suggested that the new agreement will be bolder than the previous one and bring greater purposefulness to joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, cooperation with third parties, and policy consultations between the civilian leaderships of the two defence establishments. There will be particular emphasis on operationalising the Defence Trade and Technology Initiative (DTTI) by announcing the co-production of a number of weapons systems. The DTTI launched under the previous government now dovetails nicely with Modi's emphasis on "make in India" and the new government's determination to strengthen India's domestic defence industrial base by encouraging the participation of domestic private sector and foreign arms companies.

Climate change and clean energy

Both the countries would be exploring opportunities to enhance bilateral partnership on climate change by creating policy frameworks of introducing clean energy, promoting platforms such as Clean Energy Access Network (CLEAN) and phasing down hydro-fluoro carbons (HFC). Obama's India visit is expected to operationalise US-India Partnership for Climate Resilience announced during PM Modi's visit to the US last September. It is unlikely that India would accede to any US-initiated climate deal similar to US-China bilateral agreement. While China's industrialisation might have peaked, India's future depends on further expansion of its power generation. The focus, instead, is likely to be on finding a way to rapidly expand renewable energy production in India and reduce the weight of coal in India's future energy mix with American assistance and technology transfer.

Making headway to resolve the nuclear logjam

India and the US are expected to engage in discussions that would break the gridlock over India's nuclear liability law that now prevents American participation in India's atomic energy programme. Intensive negotiations in the last few weeks have explored ways to work around the stringent provisions of the Indian law that expanded the burdens on suppliers of equipment to India's nuclear programme. If Washington is focused on liability issues, India wants America to demonstrate greater flexibility on the arrangements for external safeguards on the nuclear programme and strongly support India's membership of the various non-proliferation regimes including the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). Progress on the three fronts would help realise the full promise of the historic civil nuclear initiative that the two governments had unveiled in 2005.

Apart from economic, defence, nuclear and energy issues, both the leaders are also expected to engage in discussions over a gamut of issues ranging from maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, investments in smart cities and industrial hubs, collaboration and partnership in health, higher education and research, solutions to urban issues and cyber security challenges among others.

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