

BNP's current policy towards India

Ruse or retrospection?

MOZAMMEL H. KHAN

AFTER its failed violent movement to unseat the government in its demand for a fresh general election under a caretaker government, BNP's policy vis-à-vis India has caught many by surprise. In fact, the party followed a persistently anti-Indian policy since its inception. This was intensified with the assumption of leadership of the party by Khaleda Zia some three decades ago.

The apparent policy shift of the BNP was evidenced first when it thanked Prime Minister Modi, his government, and the leaders of the political parties that played a vital role in the passage of the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) bill in the Indian parliament. In a similar note, BNP welcomed the upcoming maiden visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi who landed in Bangladesh on a two-day state trip on June 6. In a press briefing, BNP spokesperson Asaduzzaman Khan Ripon hoped that Modi's trip will bolster ties between the people of both countries. "We are not anti-India and have never been anti-Indian and will never be anti-Indian. BNP safeguards the interest of the country. This can never be termed anti-Indian." BNP also promised it would never let Bangladesh territory to be used by Indian insurgents.

It is impossible to predict if BNP would be true to its words about its future policy toward India, but it is not difficult to recollect the past stances of BNP vis-à-vis issues between Bangladesh and its giant neighbour. Let us reflect back on a few issues

where the party made its intransigent anti-India policy nakedly obvious. In 1997, the BNP chief in a policy statement declared, "Bangladesh supports the independence movement of seven Indian states".

Following Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit from January 10-13 in 2010, at the invitation of the Indian PM Dr. Manmohan Singh, to India where a 50-point communiqué was signed, the BNP chairperson even without knowing the contents of the joint communiqué, categorically blasted the PM, and went as far as accusing her of selling the country to India.

In her press conference, the BNP chief termed the joint statement as a communiqué of India and Awami League, disregarding the fact that she went to India as the PM of Bangladesh, not as the AL chief. The opposition leader also criticised what she termed as the prime minister's "indifference" to the Tipaimukh dam issue. She said that the joint statement released during the PM's visit suggested that she had "sold out the interests of the country to India" and given a "green signal" to carry forward the Tipaimukh dam project. In fact, nothing could be further than the truth. The PM in her own press briefing reiterated the Indian PM's assurance that India would do nothing to harm Bangladesh's interest. In fact, time has proven that the Indian PM has kept his words since Tipaimukh Dam has never been built and the Bangladesh PM was proven justified in trusting the verbal words of her Indian counterpart.

During the first tenure of Sheikh Hasina's AL government, the Ganges water sharing treaty and

the Chittagong Hill Tracts peace treaty were signed. Both of these treaties were vehemently opposed by the BNP. For the CHT treaty, the BNP chief warned the nation that due to the treaty, Feni and districts in the further south would become a part of India and she led a long march to CHT, albeit with very little support from the people. The region still remains very much a part of Bangladesh. The treaty, in fact, boosted Bangladesh's image in the international arena and the PM was awarded the prestigious UNESCO peace award for her leadership in securing the peace deal.

Canadian Statesman, the late Pierre Trudeau, referring to Canada's relation with its giant neighbour, once said, "Living next to the United States is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant. No matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast, one is affected by every twitch and grunt". In Bangladesh, we can very well echo Trudeau's sentiments in terms of our relation with India. No matter how devoted a patriot one is, it would be moronic not to consider the vastness and the military might of our neighbour. The best course of action open to us would be to use the diplomatic means to defuse the tension and settle disputes. This is the front where Bangladesh has the potential to match or even supersede the skills of her counterpart. The recent signing of the LBA by all political parties in both houses of the Indian parliament has proven once again the power of diplomacy and statesmanship.

The BNP chairperson's cancelling her scheduled meeting with the visiting Indian

President in the pretext of *hartal* was the most indecorous act by a former PM to a visiting head of state, that too of a neighbouring country who played a crucial role in our Liberation War. Jingoism might win some instant votes, but it does not help to increase the flow by a single drop of water through the Ganges. It only inflicts miseries on the people and cripples the nation.

In view of the Indian PM's upcoming visit to Bangladesh, BNP has called upon Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to discuss Bangladesh-India bilateral issues with party chief Khaleda Zia before Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh. "Based on the outcomes of the discussion with BNP's chief, the prime minister will tell her Indian counterpart that the demands which she placed are not of the ruling Awami League, but every party of the country endorsed those," BNP spokesperson Asaduzzaman Ripon told a press briefing.

Starting from lauding of the signing of the LBA (which the BNP once termed as the "treaty of slavery") in the Indian parliament, welcoming Modi's visit and finally urging the PM to discuss the Bangladesh-India bilateral issues with the BNP chief before the Indian PM's visit, it sounded like the protocols exhibited by the parliamentary opposition of a perfect Westminster democracy. However, only the future will tell if the current policy shift of BNP towards India is a ruse or the outcome of sincere retrospection.

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

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Power corrupts, and absolute power...



NIZAMUDDIN AHMED

to the post of president beyond 17 years defies the principles of morality.

Joseph S. "Sepp" Blatter and the authoritarian approach of his seven predecessors belie the practice of democracy, which the world of footballing authority demands most stringently from each of its over 200 member countries. For instance, in June 2014, Nigeria was suspended by FIFA following direct government interference in the running of the game in the country. In August FIFA warned that the African nation risked being banned if an "elected" executive committee did not give up the office of the Nigeria Football Federation (NFF). Bah! Blatter bah!

Over the last 111 years, since 1904, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (said in French to add just the flair needed to divert one's attention from the dark corridors of corruption) has had only eight presidents including Jules Rimet (in office for 33 years from 1921-1954). Don't you get bored sitting on the same chair? The same room? Okay, you get to change secretaries every two to three years. I would not blame the ladies of getting tired of your officiousness, and move.

After a heroic and impudent win in the 2015 elections (29 May), to saddle the seat of presidency for a fifth straight term (not an Arab nor African nation this), on June 2 Blatter declared that he would resign from soccer's governing body amid "a widening corruption scandal" and a promise "to call for fresh elections to choose a successor". We hope not for another 17 years.

He was elected with a handsome majority at the FIFA Congress only two days after serious corruption charges, leveled by the USA, saw seven soccer officials arrested by Swiss police in a dawn raid from a Zurich hotel, events declared as dubious (not verbatim) by a man who is in the FIFA echelons since 1975. None of today's World Cup or Asia Cup or Africa Cup or UEFA Champions League or Bangbandhu Cup players were even born then.

Having never played competitive soccer and being a former general secretary of Swiss Ice Hockey (hah!) said Blatter in his victory speech,

SWITZERLAND is a country known for its tranquility, and its citizens as one of the most law-abiding in the world. How a person from such an enviable background can sit as the general secretary of FIFA for 17 years as President Joao Havelange's long-time lackey, and desire disdainfully to hold on



Sepp Blatter

"I like you, I like my job and I like to be with you. I'm not perfect, nobody's perfect." Four days later he was proven right.

Did Blatter resign after being re-elected because Europe threatened to boycott the 2018 World Cup in Russia? Why does president Putin also smell a rat? Will the Russian World Cup be held? What about Qatar in 2022? Why did 133 countries out of 209 (that's only 76 'No' votes) give Blatter the thumbs up despite the unfolding of FIFA's greatest crisis ever? Why did it take over two decades to unveil a \$150 million corruption scandal? That is almost Tk 1200 crore. We are lucky that teenagers who play football do not follow the news.

Ironically, the charges against the seven and two more senior FIFA officials were read out by US attorney general Loretta Lynch (pun inherent). The nine and 25 unnamed co-conspirators mentioned in the indictment acquired millions of dollars in bribes and kickbacks in a 24-year scheme through illegal sale of TV rights, and peddling of votes for the right to hold the World Cup and other tournaments as well as for winning posts in the committee. It is a clear case of red card and suspension for life.

The case is already partly proven. The disgraced trail was set ablaze in 2013 when former FIFA executive Chuck Blazer and three other people pleaded guilty, and Blazer forfeited USD \$1.9 million (phew, although peanuts!); Blazer was wearing two coats (pun intended) and took part in FBI's undercover

investigation. As mounting evidence against Blatter and the men on his platter, Swiss police have also seized "electronic data and documents" at FIFA's Zurich head office.

The football doyens arrested in Zurich include Venezuelan soccer president, former Brazil federation president, Costa Rican federation president, Uruguayan federation president, Caribbean football union president, and Cayman Islands association president. They have a tough battle ahead in fighting extradition to the States. And you dare call Bangladesh the second, third, whatever most corrupt nation. Mind it!

Long-term holding on to a position - sports, corporate or government - can only spell the fate of Blatter: defiant, arrogant, unethical (ignorance cannot be bliss, Sepp), despot, and old age. If a person is considered unsuitable to carry out routine office work beyond 60-65 years, how can the world rest in peace (that is what FIFA is doing today) with the affairs of over 200 countries and over 250 million players in the hands of a 79-year old?

Is it possible that football officials are only corrupt at FIFA? There are TV rights to be won in every country. There are positions sought aggressively in every federation. Perhaps there is a little FIFA in every nook and corner where a child is kicking a ball. The prudent can think of kicking more than one.

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From big brother to elder brother

SURABHI GUPTA

CURTAINS rolled down to end the 41-year old stalemate as the Indian Parliament unanimously passed the 100th Constitutional Amendment on May 7 to resolve the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA). The agreement aims to ensure proper demarcation of the border and an exchange of more than 160 enclaves between the two countries. By approving the implementation of the LBA, India has shed its "big brother" tag and acquired an "elder brother" status in South Asia as Veena Sikri, former diplomat rightly commented. I think it will be a game changer because it certainly wins perception battles and especially in South Asia where perceptions matter most.

The biggest feedback is the positive change in the psyche of the Bangladeshi people as they now know that Prime Minister Modi means business. There was a lot of skepticism when Modi was made prime minister. When something as complicated as the LBA can be solved then other contentious issues of connectivity, trade and security or economic investment, can also be tackled.

Narendra Modi has proven that the foreign policy of India is going to be the "road less taken" without taking into consideration the not-so-worthy demands of regional parties aimed merely at votes and not our national interest. This time the interest of the nation has won over politics.

It's a game changer because this softening of India's leadership role shows that the country wants good relations with its neighbours and it is prepared to solve problems in the spirit of friendship and greater magnanimity. This message will certainly be taken on board by other neighbours when they look at solving problems with India and moving ahead in the same spirit. The deal would not only end a historical thorn in the bilateral side, it would also open a new era in the relationship. India often suffers from a "perception problem" in the eyes of its neighbours, which often view India with suspicion because of its size, economy and military might. It has also reinforced the policy of change and continuity of Indian foreign policy. The Agreement also served as an ice-breaking exercise after certain intemperate outpourings by the Prime Minister during his election campaigning led to misgivings in the minds of the people of Pakistan and Bangladesh. His diplomatic outreach is intended to allay regional fears that his rise to power would herald a new hawkishness in Indian foreign policy. After BJP had ruffled feathers in Bangladesh, threatening to expel migrants from the northeast, for criticising Bangladesh for its treatment of the Hindu minority, and threatening Pakistan over the export of terror and disquieting statements over firing at the Line of Control (LoC), it seems that Modi wants to start his diplomacy on a clean slate, and without any baggage of the past.

The move has also given a fillip to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "neighbourhood first" foreign policy and he has proven that he is a leader who walks the talk. He has wisely sent out the message that India, as a dominant and powerful nation, respects the sovereignty of other SAARC nations and looks forward to cordial and inclusive relationships with them. It augurs well to resolve pending tough negotiations on issues such as border disputes, cross-border infiltration, illegal migration and fostering of terror with our neighbours. After all, fortune favours the bold.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS
- 1 Gold medalist's place
- 6 Greenish brown
- 11 Boise's state
- 12 Full of energy
- 13 Boarded, as a bus
- 14 Tendon
- 15 Sports officials
- 17 Finish
- 18 Breathing pair
- 22 Rara --
- 23 Sake
- 27 Island south of Sicily
- 29 Bulgaria's capital
- 30 Matador's foe
- 32 Put in order
- 33 Partridge perch
- 35 Chapel seat
- 38 Son of Zeus
- 39 Wise saying
- 41 Heavyset
- 45 Singer Ronstadt
- 46 Brownish gray
- 47 Like a cliff
- 48 Mideast nation
- DOWN
- 1 Pear-shaped fruit
- 2 Marrying words
- 3 Lab animal
- 4 Diamond position
- 5 Copier need
- 6 Annoyances
- 7 Boxing great
- 8 Fan publication
- 9 Tied up
- 10 Raunchy
- 16 Little lie
- 18 New born's need
- 19 Egg outline
- 20 Stream sediment
- 21 Overnight visit, say
- 24 Miles off
- 25 Script unit
- 26 Bogus
- 28 Tourist's aid
- 31 Lifeboat need
- 34 Kicks back
- 35 Buddies
- 36 Way to go
- 37 Carafe contents
- 40 Keats poem
- 42 "- Gang"
- 43 AP rival
- 44 Brewed drink

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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 MANOR IRATE
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