

Overhaul of governance in Pakistan

Anita Joshua

ISLAMABAD: With the Committee on Constitutional Reforms (CCR) presenting its draft to the presiding officers of the National Assembly and the Senate on Thursday, the country is now poised for a major overhaul of its governance structure.

Besides the repeal of the 17th Amendment by which the former President, Pervez Musharraf, had transferred decisive powers to the presidency, the draft has done away with the Concurrent List to give more provincial autonomy and makes out a case for putting in place institutional mechanisms for making key appointments.

The draft was finalised late on Wednesday night by the 26-member all-party committee after a consensus was worked out on the two contentious issues that had stalled the process: renaming

- Draft envisages more provincial autonomy
- Commission for appointment of judges

the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and setting up a judicial commission for appointment of judges. The draft was signed with considerable fanfare around midnight in full view of the media and this was followed up in the morning with the submission of the report to the two presiding officers.

As per the draft, NWFP will now be rechristened Khyber-Pakhtoonkhwa and the judicial commission will have seven members with the judiciary having higher representation and the chair. Decisions made by this commission will be sent to the eight-member Parliamentary committee that will be set up to oversee all crucial appointments.

This oversight committee

will have eight members; four each from the government and the opposition.

Both Houses of Parliament will find equal representation in this committee which seeks to take away the discretionary power of the government in making appointments to key posts like that of the Attorney-General and the Federal Public Service Commission.

This oversight committee can over-ride decisions made by the respective institutional mechanisms if six of the eight members disagree with the recommendation referred to it.

One of the most contentious issues addressed by the CCR pertains to provincial autonomy.

After considerable wran-

gling, it has decided to do away with the entire Concurrent List which had 43 items. In turn, the Committee has recommended that the Council of Common Interest — a body comprising representatives of the federal government and Chief Ministers — be strengthened to supervise matters of the federation.

Another key recommendation relates to the conduct of elections. While the Election Commission will be strengthened, there is a proposal to set up neutral governments ahead of all elections national and provincial to serve as a caretaker dispensation.

This caretaker government will be run by people selected jointly by the Leader of the House and the Leader of the Opposition, says the draft of 18th Amendment that seeks to put the country firmly on a one-way track to democracy.

Astronauts get the go ahead

BAIKONUR: A NASA astronaut and two Russian colleagues received the thumbs-up on Thursday for a mission that will boost the population of the International Space Station to six.

California native Tracy Caldwell Dyson and Russians Alexander Skvortsov and Mikhail Kornienko are to blast off at 0404 GMT on Friday from the Russian-leased Baikonur space centre in southern Kazakhstan and will reach the orbiting science lab on Easter Sunday.

At a press conference, Caldwell Dyson spoke of her sadness at seeing the end of the venerable U.S. spacecraft, which has been ferrying astronauts into space since the early 1980s. "It's bitter, because we're saying goodbye to such a tremendous part of our space program," she said. "We've spent more time in that shuttle than we have in any vehicle and it has blessed with a space station today and many experienced astronauts." — AP

U.S. H-1B visa counter opens

Exemption for those obtaining U.S. master's degree

Narayan Lakshman

WASHINGTON DC: Starting April 1, H-1B visa petitions may be submitted subject to the fiscal year 2011 cap, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) announced on Thursday.

The FY2011 cap, which is the numerical limitation on H-1B petitions, is set at 65,000 by the U.S. Congress; however the USCIS clarified that the first 20,000 H-1B petitions filed on behalf of individuals who have earned a U.S. master's degree or higher would be exempt from the cap. In FY2010, the H1B cap was reached on 21 December 2009.

In an announcement earlier this month, the USCIS said it would "monitor the number of petitions received and will notify the public of the date on which USCIS received the necessary number of petitions to meet the H-1B cap." USCIS added that if

- Numerical cap set at 65,000
- Indian firms may be affected

needed it would randomly select the number of petitions required to reach the numerical limit from the petitions received on the final receipt date.

The H-1B visa for professionals in a specialty occupation permits U.S. employers to fill a position requiring the minimum of a baccalaureate in the particular field with a qualified worker from abroad. The foreign worker is required to possess a U.S. degree or an acceptable foreign alternative.

Memorandum

However speaking to *The Hindu*, immigration lawyer Sheela Murthy said it would take a much longer time to

reach the cap this year. She said that in a memorandum issued by the USCIS on January 8 2010 said the government should reconsider whether it ought to grant H-1B visas to consulting companies.

"This would significantly affect Indian companies in particular," said Ms. Murthy, adding that many Indian companies, particularly in IT and related sectors have, since January, been facing a spike in routine denials of H-1B extensions. The memo is likely to have been issued due to pressures from the high rate of unemployment in the U.S. this year, Ms. Murthy explained.

The USCIS has also proposed redefining what constitutes an "employer," she said, and it has reverted to a definition of the term under British common law, which would again preclude many Indian firms from obtaining such visas for their employees.

Repent, extremists told

RIYADH: Muslim scholars from around the world who met this week in Medina have denounced "terrorism" and appealed to "extremists" to repent, said a statement on Thursday.

The four-day Islamic conference, sponsored by Saudi Interior Minister Prince Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz and organised by the Islamic University of Medina, drew some 500 participants, according to press reports.

The scholars condemned "all acts of terrorism wherever they take place and whoever is behind them," said the concluding statement from the conference, which wrapped up on Wednesday.

The scholars also criticised "the harm inflicted on unarmed civilians and civilian facilities under the pretext of combating international terrorism."

The statement published on the organisers' website called on extremists to "return to their senses and follow the path of groups that have announced repentance and rejected acts of terrorism".

"Hold on to moderate Islam and tolerance towards others," and "reject false interpretations of... jihad [holy war]," it said, addressing Muslim youths.

The conference urged Muslim communities in non-Muslim countries to encourage their children "to adopt a moderate understanding of Islam, respect for others and to comply with [local] laws". It also urged the governments of those countries to respect the rights of Muslims and "treat them equally with other members of the community". Saudi Arabia, which practises an ultra-conservative Wahhabi version of Islam, has in recent years cracked down on what it regards as extremist groups.

Al-Qaeda, which has been blamed for killing between 150 and 200 people in the kingdom between 2003 and 2006, has in particular been in the firing line.

King Abdullah last month said the kingdom was determined to halt extremism and a campaign was under way to try dissuade youths from joining Al-Qaeda. — AFP

Model "escapes caning"

KUALA LUMPUR: In a surprise turnaround, a Malaysian Muslim woman who was sentenced to be caned for drinking beer in public has had her sentence reduced to community service, said her father on Thursday.

Kartika Sari Dewi Shukarno's caning sentence has been commuted, said Shukarno Abdul Muttalib. He said Ms. Kartika (33) received a letter from the Pahang state Islamic and Malay Culture Council informing her of Sultan of Pahang's decision to spare her the caning.

Abdul Muttalib was quoted as saying by the Star online that Sultan Ahmad Shah had agreed to commute the caning sentence and ordered Ms. Kartika to perform community service for three weeks. She was caught drinking beer in Pahang state. Ms. Kartika, a former part-time model, was sentenced in July last



Kartika Sari Dewi Shukarno. — PHOTO: AFP

year to six strokes of the cane and a fine of Rs. 60,000 for drinking beer in December 2007 at a beach resort, in violation of Islamic laws.

She pleaded guilty and did not appeal her sentence, but the punishment was halted at the last minute following an uproar in the media and among rights activists. — PTI

Row over support for "defensive jihad"

Hasan Suroor

LONDON: Leading South Asian rights campaigners have accused Amnesty International of "undermining" the rights movement, especially the campaign against sex and gender discrimination, by working with extremist — often misogynist — groups engaged in what they claim is "defensive jihad".

The row follows remarks by Claudio Cordone, its secretary-general, that "defensive jihad" was not "antithetical" to human rights. He made the comments in response to a Global Petition from rights activists questioning Amnesty's alliance with Cageprisoners, founded by Moazzam Begg, an ex-Guantanamo Bay prisoner and dubbed "Britain's most famous supporter of the Taliban" by a former Amnesty official.

"Moazzam Begg and others in his group Cageprisoners hold...views which they have clearly stated, for example on whether one should talk to the Taliban or on the role of jihad in self-defence. Are such views antithetical to human rights? Our answer is no, even if we may disagree with them...," Mr Cordone wrote.

The initiators of the petition — Amrita Chhachhi, Sa-

ra Hossain and Sunila Abyeckera, all prominent women's rights activists — have called Mr Cordone's remarks "shocking and incredible".

"If this is the official position of the world's leading human rights organisation, this would gravely undermine the future of the human rights movement," they argued.

In a statement, they said that by endorsing "defensive jihad", Amnesty was giving legitimacy to the arguments used by fundamentalist groups to justify their anti-human rights actions.

"It is precisely 'defensive jihad' that the Taliban use to legitimise its anti human rights actions such as the beheading of dissidents, attacks on minorities, attacks on schools and religious shrines and the public lashing of women. A similar logic based on 'defence of religion' is used by the Christian right to justify the killing of doctors providing abortion services as well as by Hindutva fundamentalists to justify their violent attacks against Muslims and Christians in India," they said. Recently, Amnesty suspended the head of its gender unit Gita Sahgal after she went public with her concerns about its links with Mr Begg.

Enrolment drops in Victoria colleges

MELBOURNE: Against the backdrop of racial attacks and stricter immigration rules, Indian students' enrolment in universities in Australia's Victorian state has recorded a massive drop of around 40 per cent in the first two months of the new academic year as compared to the same period in 2009.

According to latest figures provided by the federal Education Department, foreign students were now turning their back against the state's colleges, *The Age* reported.

While international student "starts" for the first two months of this year dropped by three per cent nationally, they were down 12 per cent in Victoria in comparison with the same period last year, it said. The decline in Indian student figures has been most dramatic with their number in Victorian institutions plummeting from 6303 to 3761.

The report also said students from Malaysia, also recorded declining trend of 32 per cent. — PTI



VOICING THEIR VIEW: A banner "School is my right — the scarf is my choice," during a protest in Brussels last week. — PHOTO: AFP

Belgium votes to ban veils

On track to become the first European country to do so

Ian Traynor

BRUSSELS: Belgium has moved to the forefront of a campaign to restrict the wearing of the Muslim veil by women when a key vote left it on track to become the first European country to ban the burqa and niqab in public.

The home affairs committee of the Brussels federal Parliament voted unanimously to ban the partial or total covering of faces in public places.

"I am proud that Belgium would be the first country in Europe which dares to legislate on this sensitive matter," said the centre-right MP Denis Ducarme.

Daniel Bacquelaine, liberal MP who proposed the bill, said: "We cannot allow someone to claim the right to look at others without being seen. It is necessary that the law forbids the wearing of clothes that totally mask and enclose

an individual. Wearing the burqa in public is not compatible with an open, liberal, tolerant society." The Belgian move came as neighbouring France and the Netherlands continued to grapple with the idea of imposing similar restrictions.

The Canadian province of Quebec last week introduced parliamentary measures to proscribe facial covering in public service employment — a move that enjoyed overwhelming public support in Canada.

Support for the ban in Belgium transcended party lines, ranging from the Greens to the far right, and also resulted in a rare show of unity between the linguistically divided halves of the country.

The full support of the home affairs committee means Parliament is likely to vote for the curbs in mid-April, with a ban in force by the summer.

Under the proposals a fine or punishment of up to seven days in prison would be imposed for wearing the full-body burqa or face-masking niqab. The bill, to be debated next month, states that anyone in a public place "with face covered or disguised in whole or in part to the extent that she cannot be identified" is liable to incur the penalties.

While Wednesday's vote paved the way for the first nationwide ban on the veil in Europe, local authorities in Belgium already have the power to ban both in public places.

Of the 5,000,000 Muslims living in Belgium — with big populations in Brussels and Antwerp — very few women wear the full veil, and there has been little debate about the need to ban it.

While Mr. Bacquelaine admitted there was little problem with full facial covering among Muslims in Belgium,

he argued for a pre-emptive move, saying: "We have to act as of today to avoid [its] development." Rather than being about the burqa and the niqab, the bigger debate in Belgium — as elsewhere in Europe — is about the less severe headscarf, with Muslim parents pressing for schools to allow their daughters to cover their heads and often opting to send them to private schools tolerant of the practice.

The Belgian move is similar to other campaigns in Europe.

Following a heavy regional elections trouncing last week, President Nicolas Sarkozy of France called for a burqa ban. "The all-body veil is contrary to the dignity of women," he said. "The answer is to ban it. The government will introduce a bill to ban it that conforms to the principles of our laws." — © **Guardian Newspapers Limited, 2010**

Rajapaksa promises equality

B. Muralidhar Reddy

JAFFNA: Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa on Thursday promised reconciliation and development at an election rally organised by the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA).

In his first visit to Jaffna after re-election in January, he promised to treat all citizens as equal and work towards national reconciliation.

"You have suffered for 30 years and it is time to enjoy fruits of freedom," he told a small gathering at the Durriappa Stadium amid heavy security.

The Northern Province in general and the Jaffna peninsula in particular had voted overwhelmingly in favour of the defeated opposition nominee, retired General Sarath

Fonseka.

He conceded that the voters of the peninsula had not voted for him but added he was happy at the participation of the people in the democratic process.

Though Mr. Rajapaksa spoke mostly in Tamil, there was little enthusiasm among those present. Despite repeated references by those present on the dais on the need for early and fully implementation of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution on devolution of powers, Mr. Rapakasa skipped the contentious issue.

Mr. Rajapaksa paid a visit to the historic Nallur Temple. He also visited the Buddhist shrine at Nagadeepa Vihara.

Transformation

There is little doubt since the military demise of the



Supporters of Mahinda Rajapaksa in Jaffna on Thursday. — PHOTO: AFP

LTTE in May, the Jaffna town has undergone dramatic transformation. However, the people continue to be worried over issues like large

presence of military and the prevalence of High Security Zones.

The town is buzzing with activity with hundreds of small traders who have invaded the town virtually from every part of the island nation. The opening of the A9 Highway and easing of restrictions on movement of people and fishing rights has helped in easing the economic hardships of the people of the peninsula.

A random interaction with some of the citizens in the town revealed that the locals are apprehensive of the hordes of small time traders descending on the peninsula from the south.

They do acknowledge that the prices especially of essential commodities have fallen with the opening of the A9 Highway.

INTERNET'S POWER

Gossip spreads quickly online

It's like influenza," says researcher team

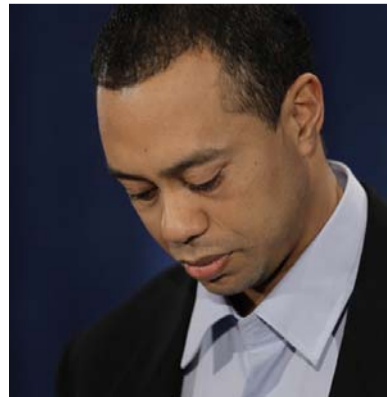
LONDON: Ever wondered why the secrets of celebrities spread on Internet so quickly like a wild fire?

Well, Italian scientists have now developed a mathematical formula that says rumours on social networking sites such as Facebook fly around the globe in a matter of hours.

Researchers at Rome's La Sapienza University have developed the equation (Time taken for spread of gossip = estimate of time (log v/phi X log squared 1/phi)) that measures the Internet's power to spread indiscretion.

In the equation, 'v' stands for number of vertices of communication and 'phi' stands for conductance, the *Daily Mail* reported.

The researchers cited the infamous text messages by golfer Tiger Woods to one of his mistresses and the alleged marital woes between French President Nicolas Sarkozy and his wife Carla Bruni, which are among the most recent gossips that spread like wild fire via blogs, Twitter and



Tiger Woods in this February 2010 file photo. — PHOTO: AP

Facebook. "And it shows just how fast news — and gossip — travels these days. It's like influenza," said Alessandro Panconesi, the lead researcher at the University.

The researchers are yet to test their theory on the latest celebrity gossip. But Professor Panconesi said he's already demonstrated its reliability — thanks to the help of a fellow researcher in the U.S.

The American mathematician recently posted one Tweet about the Italian group's failure to get the funding promised them by the Italian government to carry out their research on the spread of gossip on the Internet.

"And within 17 hours, there's a whole page about the work in the *Corriere della Sera* newspaper," said Professor Panconesi.

"Funding for science in this country is abysmal and we wanted to show it," he said. "I think we have managed it." But the newspapers in Italy, a country that is obsessed with celebrity, were more interested in hailing the research as evidence of the Internet's miraculous power to shine a light on the lives of the rich and famous.

Corriere della Sera compared the speed of Tiger Woods' fall from grace with the time it took Cicero's sniping about Julius Caesar's sexuality to be recorded in the history books by Plutarch — a snail-like 150 years or so.

The latest findings will be presented at the Symposium on the Theory of Computing in Cambridge, Massachusetts later this year. — PTI