

Bickering at the top

Deputy speaker takes on his boss

STRANGE things are happening in parliament. Some trivial matters have been pushed to the fore, as parliament continues to veer away from the major issues concerning its functioning.

The deputy speaker has blamed the speaker for what he called violation of the constitution and the rules of procedure in conducting parliament sessions. The charges brought by him have actually further demeaned the parliament which has been limping since the main opposition lawmakers decided to boycott it in June last. So the focal point of all the activities of the treasury bench should normally have been a concerted effort aiming to bring the opposition back to the House. Regrettably, the speaker and the deputy speaker have apparently managed to drag the sour side of their personal relations into the functioning of parliament itself.

The speaker's role as the man who will garner the confidence of all the lawmakers, regardless of their party affiliations, cannot be overemphasized. But our parliamentary history is not replete with examples of the speaker's remarkable successes in this respect.

Former speaker Sheikh Razzak Ali tried to win the confidence of the opposition MPs, but the same was perhaps not true about his successor Humayun Rashid Choudhury. And by the time the 8th parliament came into being, the role of the speaker appeared to be an even more diminished one, with the main debate raging over the opposition's participation in parliamentary proceedings.

What is most regrettable is that parliamentary norms lose much of their sanctity when they are violated by lawmakers themselves. The role and image of the exalted body for lawmaking is also diminished when incidents having little to do with its real function are allowed to overshadow more important matters.

The lawmakers have to realise that revitalizing parliament through participation of the opposition is at issue now. And they have to work to achieve that goal instead of wasting time and energy on peripheral matters.

What are the BCS exams worth?

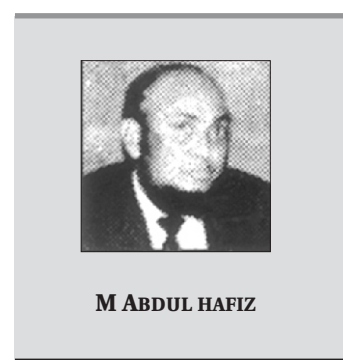
Question paper leak puts merit at a discount

THE 24th series of Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) examinations have been stalked by allegations of merchandising question papers for these in different leaked forms. Business as usual, given the past episodes of leakage centring around this very set of exams. Indeed, the preliminary test to the 24th BCS held on February 28 was stigmatised as the question paper allegedly had seen the light of day prior to the exam date. The PSC wouldn't at first cancel the test but due to public outcry they did so in the end. The rescheduled preliminary test, held on August 8, was however not uncontroversial either having been shrouded in controversy as well. And now the final written BCS examinations seem bedevilled by a leak-scandal.

What have the authorities been doing to stem the rot? By authorities we mean the ministry or the government on one level and the Public Service Commission on the other. There has always been a stock reaction of denial by the PSC whenever allegations of leak were levelled against it either as an outcome of media reportage or public or examinee outcries. With that kind of hiding the head in the sand, truth was hardly ever faced up to. Investigations, even if ordered, ended in a whimper. We would like to know how many have been punished so far for their culpability in question paper leaks?

When such a violation of law is ignored time and time again, the message that willy-nilly gets across to the public domain is that the government is acquiescent. Leakage of question paper is not just a matter of supervision or monitoring failure but devaluing a vital segment of public examinations ruining the future of meritocracy in Bangladesh. It amounts to devaluing a good candidate vis-à-vis a bad one and discouraging year-long preparations for the tests by the persevering and meritorious lot. Either we do something about it and soon enough, or are doomed to be at the mercy of poor quality leadership.

Seizing the moment for peace to prevail



M ABDUL HAFIZ

THE urge for peace has always been irresistible and so are its dynamics which are in itself self-sustaining. More so, in a volatile Middle East where only alternative to peace is ever-escalating violence taking its tremendous toll of thousands of both Israeli and Palestinian lives. The international community -- particularly the Europeans, worried over a backlash from what happens in their backyard want an end to the carnage. So, undaunted by failures after failures the peace efforts have sprung back to life with resounding response to them. Even as the road map to Middle East peace sponsored by a quartet comprised of the US, UN, EU and Russia now lies in shreds the hidden dynamics of peace have pushed up a spanking new initiative on the top of the agenda for peace and security with regards to the volatile region.

True, the peace was dealt with a severe blow by an assassin called Yigal Amir, a Jewish extremist who killed Israel's prime minister Yitzhak Rabin eight years ago to scuttle the Oslo peace process. Obviously, without Rabin to drive it

forward, Oslo soon sputtered and died. Distrust led to second intifada which rages till date. Today Ariel Sharon, the butcher of Sabra and Shatilla sits in prime minister's office while the rule of Israeli right is likely to persist beyond him. In the meantime both the Israelis and Palestinians continue to die in a no-win conflict while Yigal Amir contented over his achievement must be chuckling in the prison cell.

Yet, there are sudden stirrings in the air with over 100,000 Israelis

peaceniks has -- no wonder -- come through an unorthodox attempt at conflict resolution. A team of free-lance negotiators, Israeli Labour Party politicians and Palestinian ex-ministers -- still close to Yasser Arafat have spent last two years of stalemate thrashing out full and final peace agreement between their two peoples. Last month they could make a break-through. With the backing of Swiss government they now have a text of agreement running to some 10,000 words

the initiative.

Geneva is not however a revolutionary document. It only takes into account the solution the most people assume to be only possible solution for breaking Israeli-Palestinian impasse: the partition of Palestine into two states, one for each people -- and spells out the details. Instead of postponing the 'final status' questions the document tackles them one by one rather summarily. Jerusalem? The city will be

Instead of keeping concealed a minefield to bump into while negotiating the final status the likely pains of compromises are laid bare in the document which is considered a phenomenal piece of work bereft of so called 'constructive ambiguity' of Oslo process. The negotiators led by former ministers Yossi Beilin and Yasser Abed Rabbo thought of every possible snags in advance and gave Geneva document a decisive clarity. Notwithstanding this remarkable step in the direction of

Not only that. Even the senior Israeli government will feel obliged to give less than what is offered in Geneva. Some Israelis also echo the similar doubts: Won't future Palestinian negotiators regard Geneva as a starting point, and demand more? Amidst such scepticisms on both sides the obstacles to Geneva are not only formidable, they are also real. To overcome them there are two key players, apart from the respective leaderships. The first are the Arab states which should endorse the Geneva pact and revive the Saudi initiative, now in limbo. The Saudi initiative already endorsed by Arab states in March 2002 promised Israel full recognition from the Arab world if it returned to its pre-1967 borders. That prospect would hugely appeal to Israelis and reinforce the rationale of Geneva. The EU, and eventually the US might then prefer to back it.

The greatest role however belongs to the people of Israel and Palestine. For too long the polls have shown both sides desperate to make a deal. Yet leadership on both sides failed them. Now it is upto the Israelis and Palestinians to break that paradox. The present initiative independent of the government's backing or participation testifies that the people on either side of the divide are indeed capable of breaking the paradox by demanding that the politicians make it happen. Neither side can say any longer there is "no partner on the other side". Geneva shows there is. All it takes is the will.

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PERSPECTIVES

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converging recently on Tel Aviv's Rabin Square to remember the slain soldier-turned-peace-maker, the greatest show of strength by Israeli left since Sharon's election in early 2001. The signs are apparent that the years of paralysis and stasis may be coming to an end. Earlier the peace had a boost from an unexpected quarter. None other than Israel's Army chief of staff broke ranks to admit that Sharon's iron-fist treatment of the Palestinians "was increasing hatred for Israel and strengthening the terror organisations". In his view there could only be a political, not a military, way out.

The biggest boost for the

under the rubric of Geneva Agreement.

Already this 'virtual agreement' is gaining momentum. As planned, soon the document will be sent to all Israeli households so that Israel's all citizens can read it for themselves. Among the Palestinians the indications were already positive when *al-Ayyam* printed the Geneva text in Arabic for the first time. Bill Clinton, Nelson Mandela and FW DeClerk have shown interest to attend the signing ceremony in Geneva later this year. Britain's Tony Blair has welcomed it while Jack Straw, the foreign secretary met the close aids to discuss how Britain might help

divided to become capitals of the two states with sovereignty for each side over their respective holy sites. Palestinians' right to return? The document avoids the phrase, but proposes a solution to the plight of Palestinian refugees that will combine financial compensation with a return to the new state of Palestine rather than to Israel itself. Jewish settlements in the occupied territories? Most selfless will stay under Israeli jurisdiction, thanks to a re-drawing of the effort. In return the Palestinians would gain territory from pre-1967 Israel -- equivalent to the amount of land they had lost for Jewish settlements.

peace making in prevailing vacuum Sharon and his ministers condemned and denounced it branding Beilin and friends as virtual traitors for daring to contact the 'enemy' "behind the government's back at a time of war". Even the views of Labour compatriots of Labour-dominated peaceniks have not been helpful either. The former Labour Party prime minister of Israel, Ehud Barak who broke off with Arafat during second Camp David in 2000 talked of the effort "the peace of the ostriches, a plan that only serves Arafat". For him, signing a deal based on it will only reward the "terrorists". He called the document "a capitulation".

Bush had his secret trip to Baghdad up his sleeve!

A.H. JAFFOR ULLAH writes from New Orleans, USA

IT was the Thanksgiving Day holiday in America on Thursday, November 27, 2003. The entire nation was celebrating the day by having a family dinner in the afternoon in which the main attraction is always a baked turkey. The other attraction of the day is to watch the National Football League (NFL) game -- this year's game being played between Greenbay Packers and Detroit Lions. There was nothing extraordinary about the celebration of America's one of the traditional secular holidays excepting that at about 5:00 p.m. (Eastern time) the news organisations started to post one heck of a news in the Internet. President George W. Bush decided to skip this year's Thanksgiving dinner with his family at the Crawford, Texas ranch, his family retreat. The news media went agog while describing the first ever trip President Bush made to Iraq on this day. Only a handful of his trusted lieutenants knew about the trip and all of them were tightlipped about it. The trip was so much shrouded with secrecy that even his family members were not aware that the president would visit the U.S. soldiers stationed in Iraq on the Thanksgiving Day. *The Washington Post* in one of its Internet dispatch called it, "A trip infused with cloak-and-dagger secrecy."

According to a news report, Mr. Bush quietly slipped away from his Texas ranch Wednesday (November 26, 2003), the day before Thanksgiving holiday and flew to Washington, where he changed planes and picked up a few staff members for the long flight (about 11 hours non-stop flight) to Baghdad, the Iraqi capital. The presidential visit was planned about six weeks ago but was tightly held due to security concern. The trip was politically motivated without any question. Mr. Bush was not the first ever president to visit the U.S. soldiers during any war or conflict. President Dwight

The timing of Mr. Bush's Iraq visit could not have been better. His political strategists are now fretting over the mounting casualties the U.S. army has faced in November 2003 alone. His surprise visit did serve one purpose, though. By visiting Baghdad Mr. Bush is telling the world that Iraq is secure enough for him to travel there.

D. Eisenhower had gone all the way to Korea in 1952 to boost the morale of the U.S. soldiers engaged in a bloody conflict. In 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson also visited the U.S. soldiers in erstwhile South Vietnam. President George H.W. Bush, the father of the present president also visited the U.S. soldiers in Saudi Arabia on Thanksgiving Day on November 29, 1990, when they were preparing for the Gulf War against Saddam's army who forcibly occupied Kuwait. President Bill Clinton also visited the U.S. troops in war-torn Bosnia in 1997.

Anytime a U.S. president visits the U.S. soldiers who are stationed in a foreign land one has to assume that the trip is politically motivated. Mr. Bush's surprise trip to Baghdad is no exception. There is a growing concern amongst the U.S. citizens concerning the occupation of Iraq in the wake of a number of ambushes in which several U.S. soldiers have died in November 2003.

A teary-eyed Bush stunned 600 soldiers at a Thanksgiving celebration in the makeshift military base at Baghdad International Airport. Mr. Bush surprised the soldiers as he entered the stage with little warning and telling them they are "defeating the terrorists here in Iraq so we don't have to face them in our own country." He also said, "By helping the Iraqi people become free, you're helping change a troubled and violent part of the world." He also added, "By helping to build a peaceful and democratic country in the heart of the Middle East, you are defending the American people from danger, and we are grateful."

Mr. Bush's surprised trip lasted only two and a half hour. Therefore, it was short time-wise but it was long on message. The

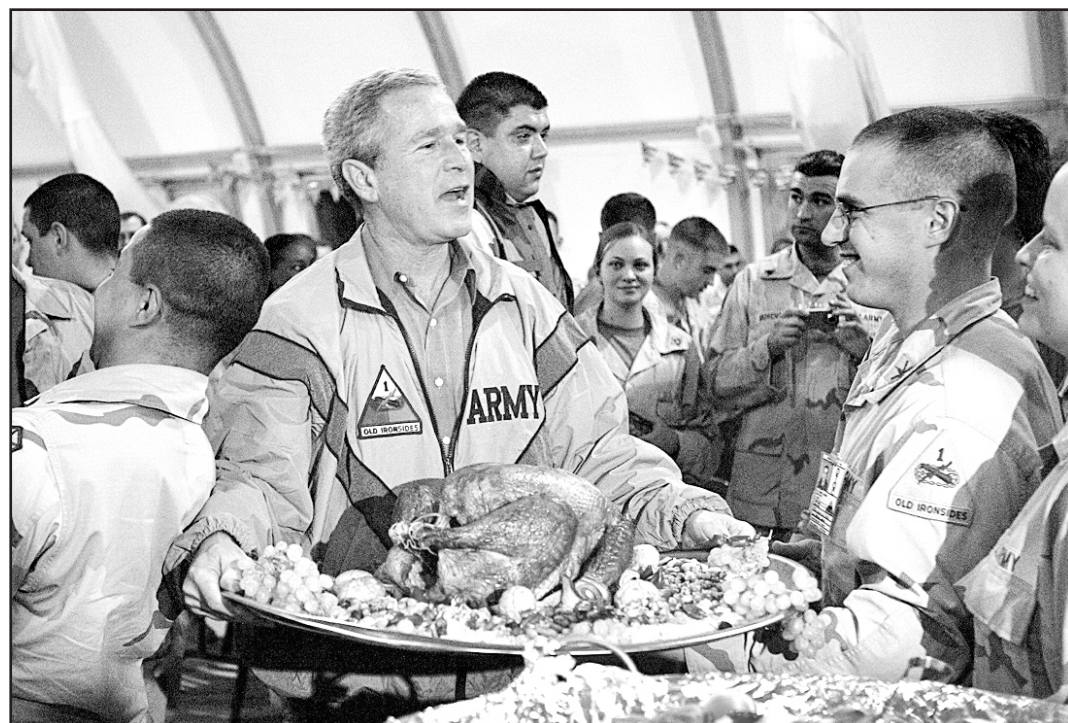
U.S. wanted to show their resolve. In a message delivered to both the U.S. troops and the Iraqi opposition, Bush acknowledged that U.S. forces are engaged in a difficult mission. He said, "Those who attack our coalition forces and kill innocent Iraqis are testing our will. They hope we will run." However, the president pledged that the United States would remain on the offensive and ultimately prevail in Iraq because according to him, "the cause is just" and he thinks that Iraqis deserve their freedom.

The news of Mr. Bush's trip to Baghdad was kept in secrecy. The stealth strategy for the visit

included a dark takeoff and spiral landing by Air Force One. Because of the nature of the trip, the running lights were shut off on a night with little moonlight as it flew under a fake call sign. While the Air Force One was on Atlantic heading to the East, a commercial pilot flying a British Airways aircraft going in the opposite direction spotted the presidential plane. He tried to strike a conversation over the radio with the pilot of Air Force One asking whether it was the Air Force One. The pilot flying the presidential plane replied that the aircraft was a "Gulf Stream," meaning a smaller one. To this, the British Airways pilot just said,

"Oh!"

After meeting only 600 soldiers and a handful of Iraqi civilians, included among them 24 members who are in the makeshift government, the governing council, Mr. Bush again embarked on the Air Force One. He then spoke to the news reporters accompanying him to Baghdad. He said, "It was an emotional moment to walk into that room. The energy level was beyond belief. I mean, I've been in some excited crowds before. But this place truly erupted. And I could see the first look of amazement and then look of appreciation on the kids' face."



Bush celebrating Thanksgiving Day with soldiers in Baghdad: Boosting morale?

OPINION

Private universities: Suffering sponsor syndrome?

MD. MOFAZZAL HOSSAIN KHAN (SWAPON)

THE number of private universities is increasing day by day in Dhaka. It is believed that students who fail to gain admission to public universities or government medical colleges go to private universities. This is partly true since public universities offer a very limited number of seats in some disciplines. Many good students who fail to gain admission to public universities study in private universities. In most cases their merits are comparable. The number of meritorious students seeking admission to the private universities is also increasing day by day.

It is a matter of great regret that most of the private universities face the acute problem of hiring qualified teachers. Due to a shortage of full-time teachers, the private universities have become too dependent on part-time teachers mostly drawn from the public universities. The migration

of teachers from the public to the private universities either as part-time or full-time teachers is also jeopardising the academic environment of the public universities in many instances.

The curricula of some selected universities are very scientific and compare well with any modern university. Most of the private universities run their academic programme on the semester system and have introduced four-year undergraduate courses. However, as some of the universities do not have proper teaching strength, the end result may not be very encouraging.

Most of the private universities do not have libraries and computer facilities good enough to cater to the need of their students. The relevant reference books and standard foreign and national journals are hardly found in the libraries of the private universities.

Almost all the private universities of the country face the problem of space and accommodation. Although according to set conditions the private universities are supposed to develop their own

campus within five years of their inception, most of the private universities have failed in this respect. The space problem has, in some instances, impeded the infrastructural development needed for the development of a congenial academic environment. Permanent campuses are better because it is through a campus that

The UGC should monitor the recruitment of faculty on a regular basis and also should check the number of faculty actually available in the department to teach. The selection committee should be well defined. The UGC can nominate one expert on the selection committee. The UGC should make the procedure for recruiting foreign faculty simple and effective.

a university provides a setting for student interaction during some very formative years of their life. This interaction contributes as much to the learning process as the formal instruction.

Some of the private universities have developed a tendency to increase the number of existing departments while their existing departments could not be fully furnished with teachers, books and

other necessary teaching materials. A balanced development of the university is absolutely necessary but ill planned and inadequately equipped departments without back-up facilities may be of little use for the promotion of higher education.

The private universities of the country are expected to supply

the public universities and ease the pressure on the public universities for admission. But the enrollment in the private universities hardly fulfils this expectation. This situation is largely attributable to the exorbitant fees charged by the private universities which are not affordable for a large segment of students aspiring for admission to the private universities.

In other words, it can be said that the high cost keeps the students away from the private universities. Education at private universities is exclusive. For this reason, the children of the middle-class or distressed family do not go to public universities. Private universities have therefore failed to a great extent to fulfil the

expectation of the government to bring higher education to the common people.

It is very difficult to comment on the quality of education in the private universities. There is no evaluation system for this. Of course, the public universities also do not have any system of quality monitoring. One advantage of the public universities is that they draw good quality students and also

good quality teachers. They start from a stronger base. This may not be true for all the private universities of Bangladesh.

One common complaint about the governance of private universities is that it is too personality based. Usually the person who takes the initiative in

establishing the private university dominates the administration. In some cases, it is the initiator who virtually runs the university. One may call this the "sponsor syndrome" in the administration. It so happened that at least two of the original initiators or sponsors had to leave their respective university because of the sponsor syndrome. In one particular university, there is a provision,

which enables the sponsor to chair the meeting of the academic council. Moreover, it has been noticed that some of the initiators try to control almost all the authorities by putting their own people in different authorities.

One of the objectives of the Private University Law, 1992 was to create skilled manpower for the economic development of the country. To ensure quality education, the law requires that private universities submit a proper academic plan with the guarantee of quality education. Quality education needs quality teachers and quality students. But it is said that some of the private universities do not follow the norms in the recruitment of teachers. On the other hand, some universities advertise on their websites for recruitment of teachers. This is definitely a good trend they have set. Lists of teachers need to be sent to UGC on a regular basis.

The UGC should monitor the recruitment of faculty on a regular basis and also should check the number of faculty actually available in the department to

teach. The selection committee should be well defined. The UGC can nominate one expert on the selection committee. The UGC should make the procedure for recruiting foreign faculty simple and effective.

On the whole, though, it can be said that some selective private universities have been able to attain the objectives of the Private University Law to a certain extent. Those institutions should be encouraged by the government, the UGC and the community to improve further.

The establishment of private universities has increased access and choice in higher education. If the government comes forward and addresses the issues raised above, we will achieve even better results in the future from the private universities.