

JS as people's house

A raw deal given so far

NOTWITHSTANDING what comes out of Khaleda-Hasina debate in parliament last night, let's set on record how the Jatiya Sangsad has fared to date.

If an institution like the Jatiya Sangsad, entrusted to discuss national issues and legislate on them where needed, is unable to do so or is not allowed because of some curious dynamics of its own, then there are more than one reason for us to be concerned. To see the parliament not being utilised for the purpose it exists, at great expense to the public exchequer, speaks volumes about the quality of commitment of elected representatives to democracy.

As it is, the current parliament has remained largely dysfunctional with the main opposition choosing to stay away for better part of its tenure. And whenever there was a chance that brought the opposition and the ruling parties together in parliament, which was not very often, and perhaps more by some cosmic intervention than by human volition, and much to the elation of the public's hopes, and whenever there was an indication that it would get down to the business of the state, we are disappointed to witness the crass manner in which some of the parliamentarians conducted themselves. A good part of the parliament's time was spent on mutual recriminations, unparliamentary swipes and unprintable expletives hurled at one another.

And, all this was done when umpteen issues of great national import, which merited the urgent attention of the parliament, went unheeded. The propensity of the treasury bench to stonewall matters was outdone by their ingenuity in dodging debates on which they thought they might be on sticky wicket. Statistical comparisons may be odious but it nonetheless reveals the output of our elected representatives, particularly of those belonging to the treasury bench. In the more than four years of this parliament only four general discussions were held, three of which were issue specific. Whereas, the decade preceding this parliament, even when the opposition had chosen by and large to stay out of it, dozens of issue-based matters came up for discussion on the floor of the house.

We cannot but also note the role of the Speaker in not making the parliament as functional as it could have been. His rejection of as many as a hundred and sixty-two opposition notices only shows how genuine he is in letting national issues be deliberated in the House. What is more disconcerting is his explanations in rejecting the notices that made him look more like a minister parroting the party line rather than the holder of the exalted post of the Speaker. He seems to forget that as the Speaker he virtually belongs to no party and certainly should be beholden to none.

We urge the people's representatives to carry out their responsibilities without wasting the parliament's time or the people's money.

The inspection tamasa

Deaths are no laughing matter, though

THERE is strange, yet convincing an analogy that's just raring to be drawn between apparently irreconcilable words. They are a metaphor for an idiotic sub-culture, so to speak. A kitchen and toilet which must be kept the cleanest in a household because of how they work and what they function for, happen to be the slimmest part in most residential quarters; which with the least cultural compunction we try to sweep under the carpet of drawing or bedroom glitz.

Likewise, we have another deceptive front in factories behind the laminated scaffolding of which lurk the unsafest of shop floors, worn out machinery tangles and levels of yardage without adequate emergency exits and fire extinguisher cylinders. Industrial concerns that should have been licensed to manufacture seem now to be licensed to kill. And think of it -- as shudders are sent through the spines -- that there are suspected to be more unregistered factories than the registered ones. How abysmally lower the safety standards in them must be!

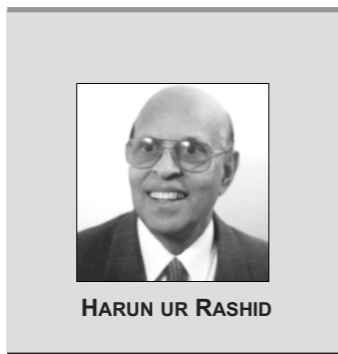
This is a dismal state of affairs, made the bleaker by an analysis of statistics that flood newspapers after a catastrophic accident or two. We, in the media, need also to introspect this seasonal aspect of post-haste statistical torrents even though these are released as we plod in.

It is the massive failure of the so-called inspection and monitoring wing under the directorate of labour ministry that has come to glaring light in a recent survey. When one gets to know that the manpower strength of inspectorate is 20 for 50,000 factories, one can only grit one's teeth in impotent rage about government's priority agenda list.

Then the emphasis of whatever little inspection mechanism we have is curiously laid on instituting cases concerning wage and job discriminations. The labour court seldom gets cases about violation of safety rules. Corruption has seeped the structure noisiously as is evidenced by the fact that inspectors are only keen to file cases where accused would come forward to negotiate with them to be let off the hook, allegedly on payment of graft.

The government has its job cut out in the area. The question is: will it move to do anything about it?

Why is President Bush visiting India?

**HARUN UR RASHID**

IN 1978, it was US President Jimmy Carter who visited India. The second visit took place in March 2000 by President Clinton, although the president's visit was almost jinxed because of America's presidential campaign, India's volatile politics, and US wrath over nuclear tests in 1998.

George Walker Bush will be the third US President to visit India for a three-day trip starting today, March 1. The purpose of the visit is to consolidate the new spirit and content of a strategic partnership with India. The US and India were not natural allies during the Cold War, but both countries were able to shed the straitjacket of Cold War positions after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

During the trip, he is expected to initiate a crucial civilian nuclear cooperation program with India provided it is separated from military program. Even it is signed it needs approval of the US Congress. The program will provide India a great leap forward in getting energy from nuclear source.

Both countries face new realities at the beginning of the 21st century and it seems their strategic interests coincide, reinforced by oil diplo-

BOTTOM LINE

The question is: can India pursue an independent foreign policy? Some say that India sees no anomaly in vigorously pursuing strategic cooperation with the US, while buying cheap Russian arms, and mending fences with China. The bottom line is that the US needs India as much as India needs the US. Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, whose obsession with realpolitik overrode any ideological affiliation predicted that "Indian influence" would one day "radiate in the Indian Ocean and down to Singapore." It seems the Bush administration has seriously taken this prediction into account.

macy and the war on terrorism. The new interests have confirmed Lord Palmerston's dictum that countries have permanent national interests and not friends.

The US is a South Asian player to secure its own geopolitical ends. As the lone superpower, it must ensure its status against all challengers, real or potential. The second administration of President Clinton (1997-2000) had a fresh look at some of basic underpinnings of Indo-US relations. During his visit in March 2000, he seemed to convey clearly that a strong India was good for the US, a democratic and prosperous India was good for the US.

For the US, India is the only country that can contain China's power in the Asia Pacific region. The US needs India, a democratic country that stands at the centre of the Indian Ocean, reaching out from the sands of Egypt to the Straits of Malacca. Furthermore, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea are part of the Indian Ocean system where more than 50 percent per cent of the world's known reserves of crude oil are located. There is an added dimension to the Indian

Ocean because of its militarization. For all of these reasons, the US needs India.

The US policy makers are happier when they can combine strategic objectives with economics. India's economic liberalization since 1991 has come to stay because it is evolutionary and as former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao used to say "it is not a one-time inspiration from God."

One of the deciding factors for the US is the economic revolution in India that promises two-fold impact. It can give India the means of securing regional power with all its corollaries. Second, it makes engagement attractive for the US businessmen who profoundly shape US policy-making.

If strategy and commerce are the two factors that guide American foreign policy, oil is its third, and the war on terror, after 9/11, has been added as well. In all of these India can do great help.

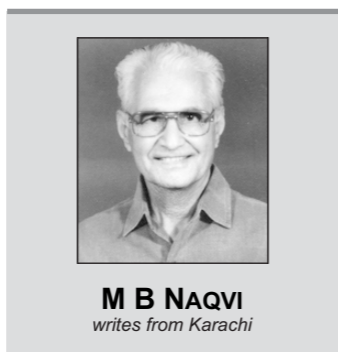
There is another dimension to Indo-US relations. It is the Israel factor. Applying Kautilya's ancient wisdom about the enemy's enemy to the friend's friend, the US

applauded when the Vajpayee government normalized its relations with Israel. Israel has been one of the strongest allies of the US in the Middle East. The Director General of the Israeli Defence Ministry visited India in 2001 when both sides discussed and agreed on defence cooperation. The sale of Israeli Arrow-2 anti-tactical ballistic missile system, the Phalcon airborne warning and control system and other equipment demonstrates an Israel-India-US axis has been emerging in the region.

On the other hand, India realizes that it cannot achieve the status of regional power comparable to that of China without American cooperation. It is a fact that the previous Vajpayee government has contributed greatly to this emerging relationship, when his government began to take stock of changing geo-political scenario.

In return, India must give the US an economic stake and must always respond to situations that are in the national interest of the US. Politics and economics are interlinked. Political ties affect economic relations.

Change, what change?

**M B NAQVI**
writes from Karachi

LAST week the country was awash with rumours that something is afoot. There were expectations of big change. Some of it spilled into print and other media. Rumours are a way of life here, to be sure. Many came true but many didn't. It is however better to be wary than to be gullible.

Rumours started when Maulana Fazlur Rahman and JI Chief Qazi Hussain Ahmed were first confined to their houses and within hours the order was countermanded and they were permitted to lead scheduled demos to protest against the Danish cartoons and also against the Musharraf regime. One finds no reason to expect any major change soon.

The rumours implied there was a section in the High Command that ordered the arrest and there was another, maybe President Pervez Musharraf himself, that changed it. That was all the proof of high-level differences. This is not logically established: the same man could have had second thoughts. A junior may have ordered the arrest and a senior one countermanded it. Too much need not be read into it.

Why? because the army remains tightly disciplined. Moreover, it has

good reasons to stay disciplined. No senior general can defy, much less overthrow, Musharraf. All biggies stand to lose privileges that various dictators have given the senior military officers. Therefore no change can be expected, except in the case of very serious differences among generals. That is, when the bases of the military's power erode. No such change is likely or visible. Ergo, none should spread rumours.

True, there is much restiveness in the country. Most people see King Chaos coming. Some of the primary institutions of state are eroding fast. Look of things is not good. There is trouble in North and South Waziristan, not to mention Bajaur Agency. The Danish cartoons have been a trigger for mass demonstrations, a few violent. The trigger has released the pent up anti-regime feelings. The regime is unpopular throughout FATA and not in Tribal Agencies alone. NWFP as a whole displays much disaffection.

The traditionalist tribesmen love the religious right. All Muslims are touched by their Prophet's sanctity. Perception of insult to his memory sends people into uncontrollable rage. This is a given. Muslims tend to become violent if an insult to the Holy Prophet is

involved. Protests against Danish cartoons are doubly intense because they also serve as a channel through which pent up feelings are being expressed.

NWFP and tribal areas being under rightwing religious parties' influence, many tribal areas have also come under the stifling influence of Taliban or even al-Qaeda. The area is alarmingly restive and it is growing. But the Musharraf regime somehow remains sanguine about Pushtoon restiveness.

Look at Balochistan. An insurgency of sorts -- low-level and intermittent it may be -- is a fact of life. Not a day passes, when some grievous violation of law and order is not reported. Authority is at war with at least Bugti and Marri tribes. Sabotage is the preferred Baloch way of registering protest, not that exchanges of rocket fire do not take place every now and then. Both sides suffer casualties. Disaffection with Islamabad is widespread over who is to control the province's resources.

Islamicists are not absent from Balochistan. Any number of Taliban and al-Qaeda elements seem to have found refuge in Balochistan. The government however is sure that India and the Karzai regime are

behind some of the troubles in Balochistan. It is hard to be sure about this charge. It is conceivable that the Manmohan Singh government and Karzai regime are paying Pakistan in its own coin. Both complain that terrorists are crossing over into their respective domains from Pakistan. So if they are involved -- not necessarily provable -- it can be understandable. Both sides can be equally guilty. But blaming outsiders for domestic troubles is generally an excuse by security agencies for their failures.

Time was when Americans were being accused of inspiring Baloch separatism: some still hold them responsible. But given the regime's international role, it is hard to believe that the Americans would undermine Musharraf's regime. Because, if the Musharraf regime is overthrown, the country will lurch into more serious troubles. That will cause more troubles to great powers. Few major foreign powers, India included, can afford to destabilize Pakistan.

People are groaning over the level of inflation during the last two years. It is continuously at 7 to 9 per cent virtually per week. Life is ever harder, with mutton at Rs.260 or beef at Rs.130 per kg. Sugar is at

Pakistan remains India's bug-bear. For a long time the US prevented the replication in South Asia of the relationship that maintains the balance and stability of the North and South American continents. The US strengthened China to counter the Soviet Union and China armed Pakistan. Suspicions existed during the 1980s that the US looked to Pakistan as a replacement for the Shah's Iran.

While visiting Pakistan for a short trip, India thinks that President Bush may persuade Pakistani military leader President General Pervez Musharraf to accept India's due role for regional peace and stability. The US has to induce Pakistani leaders to come to terms with the geo-political importance of India. They have to impress on Pakistan that India poses no security threat to Pakistan because it is secular, pluralist, and democratic.

The US may emphasize on Pakistan that it should realize that India's own security is so closely tied up with Pakistan and that Pakistan should be able to sort out internal political instability and achieve democracy. That means the US will have to tame Pakistan by not building up Musharraf as a hero and victim of terrorism.

In an interview on February 25, President Bush noted that he would raise the issue of terrorism with Pakistani leaders and would urge them to dismantle the apparatus of terrorism within the country. He also would urge both Indian and Pakistani leaders to resolve the fractious Kashmir dispute. It seems that it has fallen on the Bush administration to be in a position to "discipline" Pakistan, defuse the threat of India's retaliation, and avert another war in South Asia on Kashmir.

Rs.42 per kg. Ghee has kept pace. Wheat flour is at Rs.170 per bag of 10 kg. Vegetables and fruit prices are in stratosphere. The common man meets the state in the shape of taxmen, policemen, security agencies and local mandarins. This encounter usually results in currency notes changing hands. The state's visage is not benevolent. People are only conscious of the lower bureaucracy's refusal to do its duty without a bribe. The distant central government does not signify commoners.

Why ignore the rampant anti-American feeling? This predates the Danish cartoons, of course. American foreign policy is widely disliked. Its espousal of Israeli security and what the Israelis are doing to the Palestinians are debit entries in the ledger. America by reducing Afghanistan to rubble and smoking out of the Taliban regime has not endeared itself to any Pakistani; even the secular and pro-democracy forces find it aggressive.

What they have done in Iraq is again to destroy a state, possibly for ever through civil war. There may never be a united Iraq again. That tragedy does not concern Arabs alone. It means the jungle law for all states. What the Americans have done to Pakistan is to sustain a line of dictators from Ayub Khan down to this day. Aid, regular or for disasters, does not excuse that. Pakistan's democracy was killed by its own bureaucracy in collusion with Americans way back in early 1950s. The Americans were interested in acquiring stooges. They succeeded and Islamabad has always been ruled by American stooges. Americans should not expect the Pakistanis to thank them for this. True, their aid has been

A few challenges remain for India. First, China's policy of improving economic ties with India while continuing defence cooperation with Pakistan presents the need for major diplomatic creativity on the part of New Delhi. Secondly, India cannot ignore the link between Pakistan and the US. The US will maintain warm relations with Pakistan so long as the war on terrorism continues, ignoring the continuation of an undemocratic regime. Third, recent voting pattern of India against Iran at the IAEA, ignoring the views of the left-wing members of the coalition government, raises the question as to whether the Manmohan Singh government has become too much aligned with the US for receiving US nuclear technology.

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PLAIN WORDS

Change is the law of the nature. Pakistan too will change. But when is not clear. For many years to come, the Army is ensconced in power. Most generals remain faithful to their chief for solid reasons. The army discipline is a necessity for the privileged senior officers. So long as Musharraf regime does what it has been doing -- viz. to heap privileges on the army officers -- the discipline of the army will remain tight. Thus no change is likely in near future.

considerable. But to whom has it gone? How much has it benefited the common man? These are also debit items.

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True, history abhors long dictatorial regimes. But history never announces when will which change occur. We can talk of pre-conditions. The main pre-conditions are: there has to be a countervailing force to the military and a leadership to lead it. Common people, poor and disorganized as they are, constitute that force. But do PPP, PML(N) or MMA, constitute the required leadership? Benazir Bhutto, the *eminence grise* of PPP, totally relies on the Bush administration to put her PPP in power. What PML(N)'s Nawaz Sharif relies on is a trifle unclear. Is he any different in mentality from MMA? Can they mobilize people and lead them in the struggle for dislodging the army from power?

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Setting bad precedent

The whole scenario presents a most despicable state of our moral values at the instance of our political godfathers. Many respectable public institutions built over years of strenuous efforts wedded to high moral integrity are now rendered literal corpses of the good past. This is another way of debasing our national, intellectual and moral stature and earning global condemnation as the most corrupt country of the world!

KAZI ALAUDDIN AHMED

IT was indeed a strange but most significant coincidence that the US Assistant Foreign Secretary Christina Rocca, during her brief visit here in the last week of January made identical observations on a free and fair election. This was absolutely in tune with EC representative body Troika'. Ms. Rocca was in Dhaka on a specific mission to assure full US support to Bangladesh in her anti-terrorism programme. Yet surprisingly she had on her agenda the ultimate prospect of democracy in Bangladesh vis-a-vis the imperative necessity of having a free and fair election with unimpeded participation of all the political parties, particularly the Awami League. She did also ask for a meaningful dialogue between the government and the opposition, a totally independent Election Commission without any interference of the

administrative machinery. Her visit to late SAMS Kibria's house and offering personal words of consolation to Mrs. Asma Kibria and her children was in itself a very significant part of the entourage.

Though the natural concern expressed by the EC representative body and the US Assistant Secretary of State was turned to be an identical apprehension the reaction of the Finance Minister appearing in the news media on Troika pleadings was indeed very casual and unfortunate. He was reported to have made an instant satirical remark on EC representation viz Troika comparing its strength with the proverbial 'Nidhram Sardar' and dismissing it as of no consequence. He was remarkably mum on Christina Rocca's advocacy for a free and fair election in 2007. However, on the two suggestions the LGRD Minister was relatively feeble in his comments -- particularly on the

Troika apprehension that unless a free and fair election was ensured Bangladesh could turn out to be another Cambodia.

In any case, both the EC representative body and Christina Rocca made pointed reference to the neutrality aspect of the Election Commission and thought that this constitutional body shouldn't be administered and controlled by Prime Minister's Office. Besides, some of their words had been expressive of consternation at the dubious role played by the CEC. The queer episode being enacted on his health condition has already provoked bitter criticism across the country. His purposeful evading of the press (Troika excepted) compounded the doubts manifold and also put his desired impartial role into an absolute jeopardy. Consequently, the opposition demand for his immediate removal has been further strengthened.

Notwithstanding the curt and

sarcastic remark from some stalwarts in the government the urgent necessity of holding a free and fair election in Bangladesh is fast turning out to be a global concern. At the latest we had confirmation of such a plea from the speakers in the Bangladesh forum convened international conference in Berlin, Germany on 'Human Rights in Bangladesh and the Civil Society'. Here the consensus had been that for development of democracy in Bangladesh the essential precondition would be a universally acceptable general election. And in the process of achieving such a desired goal the European Parliament and the European countries were reported to have committed themselves to work together for assisting the election process in Bangladesh in an effective and transparent manner. It is yet to be known if such a projected programme shall ultimately include reform and reorganisation of the Election Commission in the first place when the 'sick' CEC may no longer be a party.

Around the same time here in Bangladesh we have yet another public service institution limping on its weary way for over one year now since its birth. Curiously enough the Independent Anti-Corruption Commission presents an almost identical scenario at its

highest echelon. Here too, the Chairman (ret. justice) and the other two members (one a ret. university teacher and the other a former chairman/FD of sector corporation) can hardly agree with one another on policy matters. And unfortunately, this important commission, being funded by ADB (Asian Development Bank) is yet to have its own rules and regulations, its functional leverage and administrative jurisdiction vis-a-vis its legal handle. A world of confusion interposed by frequent exchange of contradictory arguments making unwholesome inroad into the logical sequence of decision-making has been preponderant.

On January 30, 2006, the Finance and Planning Minister Saifur Rahman attended a meeting at the behalf of ADB again. Here, he asked the chairman and the two members of the commission to compose their differences within next 7 (seven) days and obtain formal approval of the rules of business and administrative framework. Meantime, the whole nation shall await a revitalised, down to earth, mobile and a meaningful Anti-Corruption Commission making an all out, serious endeavour to blot out the almost indelible story of the most corrupt country of the world -- five times in succession.

Separation of judiciary from executive is again a long outstanding issue awaiting early settlement as per directives of the Supreme Court. There has been lot of arguments over it but the progress towards a final settlement has been utterly discouraging. The present government continues to pray for more time to meet the directives of the Supreme Court. At the latest, it has asked for four more months' time under the threat of facing contempt of court. Parties in the opposition, Supreme Court Bar Association and the Bar Council continue their protest against government's 'deliberate' indifference to abide by the decision of the highest seat of justice in the country. It is doubted that the government shall not be able to fulfil its legal and moral obligations before the next general election.

The seminar/discussion meets subsequent to the annual parade of Bangladesh Police at Rajbari in December 2005 presented an impression as to the extent of political influence the whole police force and other agencies for law and order has been subjected to. Though feeble, some officers in the higher echelon of the Bangladesh Police openly contested and detested political

pressures on the part of the government which, they thought, clashed with the execution of their responsibilities they were supposed to do under oath, to the state. There is yet another side of the coin that openly flouts the rules and regulations governing service conduct of any government official. The District Judge of Dhaka, long before his relinquishing the position has publicly expressed his willingness to seek BNP nomination in the next election. As per law of the land this is strictly forbidden. But who cares? In any case, his over-enthusiasm has already created furor among other potential nomination seekers of the party. A very pertinent question has already been raised on the legitimacy of his position as the district judge of Dhaka and to pass free, fair and impartial judgement on political litigations. Unfortunately he has exposed his partisan features at such a time when the government itself is almost face to face with contempt of court for flouting/not implementing the directives of the Supreme Court on the outstanding issue of separation of judiciary from the executive.

Amid such and many other irregular and unconstitutional activities of the political parties in

power, yet another public service institution of the country has been on the rampage of political vendetta. The lone Public Service Commission which hitherto used to enjoy reasonable freedom in dispensing fairplay and justice to the employment seekers, has been put on the dock allegedly on its dubious conduct of BCS examinations. We have heard of a good number of scandals around such examinations.

The whole scenario presents a most despicable state of our moral values at the instance of our political godfathers. Many respectable public institutions built over years of strenuous efforts wedded to high moral integrity are now rendered literal corpses of the good past. This is another way of debasing our national, intellectual and moral stature and earning global condemnation as the most corrupt country of the world!

Kazi Alauddin Ahmed is a management consultant.