

Development held hostage by politics

Hartal and confrontation taking severe toll

ASIAN Development Bank (ADB) chief Hua Du states the obvious when she says that Bangladesh's economy has been adversely affected by the recurring political conflicts. But she speaks with an insight of someone who has seen first hand how an increasing political confrontation between the BNP and AL is hindering the prospect for faster national growth in Bangladesh.

Just imagine how much more Bangladesh would have grown had the standoff between the two major political parties not escalated over the last decade. There is no quantification as to how much loss in terms of probable GDP growth we have incurred due to political confrontation and strikes, but if two percent of the GDP growth has been undercut by corruption, then the loss on account of political unrest might have been even greater. Only if we could curb corruption to a reasonable extent and eschewed the path of political confrontation our growth rate would have favourably compared with that of fast growing India and perhaps even China.

It is with trepidation that we watch the political situation becoming extremely ballistic and volatile centring around the upcoming election. AL's countrywide blockade programme ended yesterday by constricting supply of commodities to various markets. Today's dawn-to-dusk hartal will extract crores of taka in terms of economic losses, let alone its psychological and social costs of varied nature.

People are genuinely apprehensive about how much worse the state of political confrontation could get during the five weeks left to the caretaker government takeover. The way things are unfolding, trepidation cannot also be shrugged off regarding the fate of the interim caretaker rule. AL has already made clear its intention for an unrelenting movement should Justice KM Hasan become chief adviser to the caretaker government.

In such a speculative and highly volatile political scenario, it is the economy that gets the hardest hit.

In this context, MK Anwar's statement that BNP is ready to invite the AL officially to a secretary-general level talk if the opposition is willing to have it, deserves to be pursued.

Mass arrests, no bail

Against law and human rights

THE report that majority of the mass arrest victims have not been granted bail obviously does little to assuage the hard feelings of their family members and all concerned citizens. While the legal basis of the mass arrests has come under a barrage of questions, it is doubly regrettable that many of those arrested before the opposition grand rally in the city have been implicated in old cases to prevent their getting bail.

This is antithetical to rule of law, human rights and all norms of democracy. In our context people are being harassed by the police on this or that pretext. In this particular case, the preemptive action of the police was clearly aimed at foiling the opposition rally. But the problem is that they have also picked up unsuspecting passers-by who were not even remotely connected with politics.

Such operations create a sense of insecurity in the minds of people whatever the government authority might like to say in support of its draconian measure. The constitutional rights of citizens get lost when intimidation and repression replace the due process of law.

The victims are made to suffer inhuman conditions of living as their relatives move from pillar to post to find them out and get them released. The ordeal of the victims is further compounded when police are apt to ask for bribe to set them free. This can create insurmountable problems for the poor arrestees and their families. It is a glaring example of what can happen when police are given the licence to arrest people at will.

So the ruling party's scheme of using the police for purely political purposes is not only undemocratic but also helping the policemen to indulge in corrupt practices. We do not perhaps need a better example of how making political use of the police can set off chain reactions, all very negative.

Let's get the voters' list right

The Election Commission should immediately consider formation of a Vigilance Team comprising volunteers from various EMOs and representatives of various political parties. These teams will be engaged in scrutinizing the Electoral Roll of the respective areas under direct supervision of the District Election Officer and their work will be coordinated by the Thana Nirbahi Officer (TNO) at upazilla level.

SADRUL HASAN MAZUMDER

DEMOCRATIC election systems require a good Electoral Roll, which is ideally prepared following certain criteria and mechanism for identifying eligible voters and preventing ineligible persons from voting. Such a mechanism helps in guaranteeing the 'one person one vote' principle by preventing people from voting more than once during an election. It's the accurate Electoral Roll which is the fundamental document ensuring a good election and the basis on which the election officials identify fake voters in the elections. Thus fair and democratic election completely depends on the accuracy of the Electoral Roll.

Electoral Roll is nothing but the

compilation of various data about the eligible voters of a country, and although statistics allow certain five percent error, it is not at all acceptable when it comes to preparing the Electoral Roll because such an error may reverse the outcome of an election in some constituencies. Thus, the Election Commission should make every effort in making the Electoral Roll cent percent accurate.

The right of all adult citizens to participate in the affairs of the government is one of the cornerstones of democracy. As the foundation stone of democracy, especially where it is a parliamentary form of government, integrity and accuracy of the voter roll are of paramount importance, which ideally means the inclusion of all legally eligible persons in the

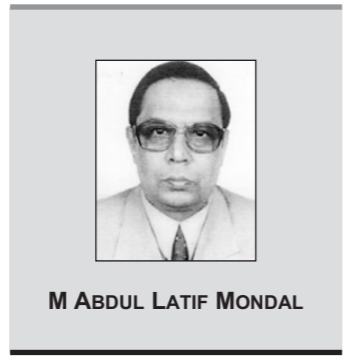
Electoral Roll. It is unpardonable to exclude any eligible voter from the Electoral Roll.

Electoral Roll is the fundamental component of any voting system. Enrollment procedures therefore need to strike the right balance between the need to be rigorous to ensure integrity of the rolls, and the need for flexibility to ensure people's right to enroll and vote.

Controversies and complaints lodged by political parties and candidates have shrouded the electoral process in a mystery. Such a state of affairs undermines public confidence in the efficiency of the Election Commission. The Civil Society Organizations, along with the NGOs, should boldly come forward to establish an independent Election Commission free of political interference. Initiative of

the Civil Society and NGOs helps bridge the gap between the political parties and the Commission, which can be strengthened through collaboration between the two agencies.

During the registration period a good number of people get an excellent opportunity to be involved in the electoral process as volunteers with specific responsibilities. These responsibilities may include initiating voters' education campaign, encouraging the people to register as voters, monitoring the conduct of the government officials, and implementing a system lodging complaints, if there are any, regarding preparation of the Electoral Roll. These activities, including identification of probable problems in the process of registration, can substantially enhance the quality of the



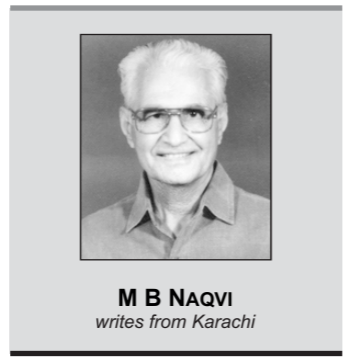
M ABDUL LATIF MONDAL

THE 8th parliament of Bangladesh went into its 23rd and final session on 10 September with lawmakers of the main opposition AL staying away from the opening day's sitting. The AL lawmakers attended the sitting on 12 September, and have continued to do so. The business advisory committee (BAC) which met without the representatives of the main opposition AL on the opening day of the session, under the chairmanship of the speaker, decided to run the session for 14 days i. e. up to 27 September. The speaker is, however, reported to have said that the 14-day time frame could be extended, if necessary.

The famous saying goes: "All's well that ends well." Although the current parliament, like all other parliaments in the nineties, remained mostly dysfunctional due to boycott of the sessions/sittings by the main opposition party lawmakers, the people's expectations from the final session of the current parliament run high. To be specific, the people hope that this final session will enable the two major political parties -- the ruling BNP and the main opposition AL -- to arrive at a consensus on the burning issues that have created a political impasse and put the nascent democracy at stake. People hope that the ruling BNP-led alliance will take steps for enactment of some laws of public interest, promised by the ruling BNP-led alliance, in this final session.

Prime minister and leader of the house, Begum Khaleda Zia, and leader of the opposition in the house, Sheikh Hasina, are on record as saying, more than once,

Good, but far more is needed



M B NAQVI
writes from Karachi

RESIDENT of Pakistan and the Indian Prime Minister met in Havana the other day. This has to be welcomed because they have succeeded in breaking the deadlock and have launched the third, or maybe the fourth, round of Indo-Pakistan composite talks. The first two rounds were, despite some sparkling confidence-building-measures, failed to tackle any dispute. The third round was still born. Let us hope this fourth round will at least solve the 'Sir Creek issue', the one that may be the only possible success.

While the dialogue is welcome, it is hard to ignore that during the last two years India and Pakistan talks could go nowhere. The two are still floundering; the backwoodsmen on both sides are in full cry; on the Indian side this gentry has in fact rebelled against Dr. Singh over the 'Siachin solution' that the Indian Premier was suggesting. This time round Dr. Singh seems to think that

Although the current parliament, like all other parliaments in the nineties, remained mostly dysfunctional due to boycott of the sessions/sittings by the main opposition party lawmakers, the people's expectations from the final session of the current parliament run high. The final session may continue up to the third week of October to attain the objectives.

that parliament should be the centre for all activities of national importance.

An attempt has been made below to briefly discuss the aforesaid issues of national importance, and it is expected to convince the BAC to extend the time of the final session of the 8th parliament.

After carefully examining the AL-led 14 party proposals of 22 November, 2005, for reformation of the caretaker system of government (CTG), the election commission (EC) and the electoral laws, the ruling BNP agreed to discuss these issues in a committee. Accordingly, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, in her address to parliament on February 28, proposed formation of a committee, comprising of members of the BNP and the AL, to discuss the aforesaid proposals and devise a fair system to ensure holding of free and fair elections. But the BNP complicated the issue by including two Jamaat-e-Islami and IOJ members, the junior partners in the BNP-led alliance, fully knowing that those two would not be acceptable to the AL. In May, the AL objected in writing to those two names. The BNP has not replied to this letter in the last four months. During the last two months or so, the prime minister and other high-ups of her party, in their speeches in public meetings and interviews with the media, ruled out the necessity for discussing the AL-led coalition proposals for reformation of the CTG, the EC and the electoral laws.

In a sudden development, the

prime minister, during her address to a public meeting in the district of Brahmanbaria on 14 September, called for a dialogue between the secretaries-general of the BNP and the AL to break the stand-off. This was an apparent departure from her recent uncompromising stance on the opposition demand for reforms. But the prime minister returned to her previous hard line when she, in response to opposition demand for a written proposal, declared at Moulvibazar on 16 September that the next general election would be held under a CTG according to the constitution, and they (BNP) were least bothered whether anyone accepted it or not. Yet in another development, minister for agriculture and a member of the inner cabinet, MK Anwar disclosed in a discussion meeting on 'Face-to-Face: Woman Journalists' in the capital on September 19 that BNP would officially invite the AL if the latter agreed to the secretaries general level meeting, for talks on reform proposals. Mention may be made that the AL has not rejected as yet the secretaries general level dialogue; rather the AL has asked for a formal proposal. Some political observers are of the opinion that the prime minister made the secretary-general level dialogue offer under immense international pressure. They are, however, still hopeful of a dialogue, either at secretary-general level or bipartisan committee level. The people's perception is that both Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina will ultimately realize that no party is all-powerful, and that the BNP and the AL will seize upon the last, and

possibly the only one, chance available in the final session to iron out differences over the issues of the CTG and the EC.

The secretary-general level dialogue may not bring the desired results. Firstly, the BNP secretary general and local government, rural development and co-operatives minister, Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, has fallen sick and been flown to Singapore for treatment of his ailing heart. In that case it may not be possible to start the secretary-general level dialogue before October. Secondly, the health condition of the BNP secretary general may not permit him to sustain the tension of such a tough dialogue. Thirdly, one-to-one dialogue may not be an appropriate forum to find out ways and means to solve the intricate issues involved in the dialogue. Fourthly, in case one-to-one dialogue fails, little or no time will be left for bipartisan committee level dialogue proposed earlier by the prime minister in her address to parliament on February 28.

Under the above mentioned circumstances, the dialogue at the level of the bipartisan committee comprising of members of the ruling BNP and the main opposition AL appears to be a better alternative.

Anyway, whether it is one-to-one man dialogue or bipartisan committee level dialogue, the results of the dialogue have to be placed before the house. If there is a consensus on the reform proposals amendments to the constitution will be necessary. In case of reforms in the electoral laws, amendments will be necessary in the Representation of the People

Order (RPO), 1972.

The amendments to the relevant provisions of the constitution, and amendments to the RPO, involve a lengthy process. The draft bills of the amendments will have to be approved by the cabinet for placement in the house. The bills will have to be scrutinized by the relevant standing committee(s) in parliament for their passage in the house. Bills passed by parliament have to be presented to the president for his assent. The constitution empowers the president to withhold his assent for 15 days, or return a bill to parliament with a message requesting that the bill, or any particular provisions thereof, may be reconsidered. If a bill so returned by the president is again passed by parliament, with or without amendments, the president shall assent to the bill when it is presented to him.

The above process has been briefly mentioned only to suggest that if there is a minimum understanding, at the secretary-general level or bipartisan committee level dialogue, implementation thereof may not be possible within the given timeframe for the final session of this parliament. So, there is need for extension of time of the on-going final session.

During the last four years or so, the ministers concerned have gone on record assuring enactment of certain laws of public interest. Specific mention may be made about (a) enactment of consumer protection law; (b) enactment of a new law replacing the existing natural water bodies protection law; (c) enactment of law for right to information; and (d) enactment of law on contempt of court.

The proposed consumer protection law aims at protecting the rights and interests of the consumers. Available information suggests that the draft of the proposed consumer protection law was approved in principle by the cabinet in September, 2004. But since then, nothing is known about the fate of the proposed law.

The proposed natural water bodies protection law is to replace

the existing natural water bodies law-2000, which has its application only on the water bodies of the cities, divisional and district towns and municipalities. The proposed new law will have its application all over the country. It has recommended some strong protective measures, and prescribed harsh punishment for violation of any provision.

There are reports that vested interest groups are actively trying to block the passage of the above two laws. The government must not succumb to their pressure, and must pass these two laws during this final session.

The contempt of court bill was expected to be passed in the last budget session. The chairman of the relevant standing committee in parliament then said that the members of the committee showed great interest in the bill, and they were taking some time to arrive at a consensus so that the bill could be passed unanimously. The contempt of court bill clearly defines which acts constitute contempt, and which ones do not. The bill is also media-friendly.

Available information reveals that the draft of right to information bill, prepared by the law ministry on the basis of the draft furnished by the law commission, is gathering dust at the information ministry which will deal the passage of the law in the house. The passage of right to information law will, inter alia, help combat unbridled corruption in public offices of the country, and thereby help remove the stigma as the most corrupt nation in the world.

In view of what has been stated above, there is need for extension of time of the final session of the 8th parliament. The final session may continue up to the third week of October to attain the stated objectives. That will still leave a week for parliament to exist.

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MB Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

PLAIN WORDS

The fact is that the two countries need to aim at a worthy and feasible aim. The aim of the current effort is 'normalization'. Aren't Pakistan's relations with Venezuela normal? Similarly India's relations with Peru are also quite normal. Do two South Asian worthies want this kind of "normalization"? The 'normalization' aim is totally inadequate. Something that can inspire the common people is required

at least 'Sir Creek issue' can be solved. On all the rest of issues the two are likely to go on differing. If the dialogue continues beyond 'Sir Creek', it will be a kind of success with a small's. But can the continuance of a fruitless dialogue be regarded as a worthy aim for the two governments?

The fact is that the two countries need to aim at a worthy and feasible aim. The aim of the current effort is 'normalization'. Aren't Pakistan's relations with Venezuela normal? Similarly India's relations with Peru are also quite normal. Do two South Asian worthies want this kind of "normalization"? The 'normalization' aim is totally inadequate. Something that can inspire the common people is required. What can it be? May one suggest that nothing short of full reconciliation and vibrant cultural exchanges, trade and economic co-operation will fit the bill.

There are two others to be tackled. Cultural exchanges should lead to ending the indoctrination of young minds at schools in both

countries. This will greatly reduce the consequent stereotyped mindsets, prejudices and hostile attitudes. This is one reason why democratic and public-spirited people have been suggesting freest possible travel between the two countries. More mixing of people, along with free trade and economic co-operation, will revive the thousand and one commonalities and will erode the recent bitterness. But this objective is not in the minds of either government; the bureaucracies on both sides, representing vested interests and ultra rightwing sensibilities, are not willing to let go of their control over travel. Without this free travel, preferably visa-free, nothing much can be achieved; the vested interests will always sabotage all efforts to bring the two countries together. Nobody should be under any illusion that the interests bound up with militarization programmes in either country will easily allow free travel and genuine friendship among the people. The vested interests on both sides require hostility between

the two countries so that ever more resources are devoted to military programmes.

Let's not forget that last year Dr. Singh was sanguine about solving the 'Siachin glacier issue' and thought that he would carry the Indian opinion. The Indian generals began to oppose the withdrawal as impossible without Pakistan agreeing to the conditions they attached. It appears that Indian generals have in fact prevailed over India's Prime Minister and he no longer talks of solving 'Siachin problem'. It will be recalled that 'Siachin problem' had been solved way back in 1989 and a treaty had been initiated by the Foreign Secretaries. India had agreed to Pakistan's proposal of simultaneous withdrawal of both sides' troops to positions held by either side before the Indian occupation of Siachin glacier in 1984. But the Indian government temporized it and the dispute has lasted, for no rhyme or reason, for 22 years. And it is not in India's interest to keep those troops there at the cost of many corers of rupees

everyday, with no strategic purpose being served by those troops.

Kashmir used to be the stumbling block to hold up all progress in India-Pakistan relations. Up to a point, it is still so. But after what Mehbooba Mufti and Indian Kashmir's CM have said, the outlook cannot now remain bleak for South Asia. Apparently Gen. Musharraf has assured India that Pakistan, having changed the stance on UN Resolutions, does not demand any change on the boundaries in Kashmir. Pakistan and India can now agree to a solution more easily. Kashmir need not remain the stumbling block that it was. Not that a solution of the 'Kashmir problem' would be easy even now. The Indian stance is still rigid and legalistic. The Indians would want Pakistan to have nothing to do with Kashmir, except probably some role in Azad Kashmir. There can still be many slips between the cup and the lip. There are still several solutions possible. But that would require statesmanship on both sides. But the thing has been in short supply in both countries where matters concern Kashmir. In short, it is still an issue that can hold up progress.

Finally there is the biggest stumbling block that no one is talking about. It is the presence of atomic weapons on both sides. The fact is that these weapons are now the sheet anchor of both the countries' national defence policies. The peculiar nature of these weapons is that they shatter confidence

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the number of registrants in a region, the current Electoral Roll can be compared with that of the previous elections.

—Determining duplicate registrations and the registration of ineligible voters, various computer applications can be used for the existing election database.

The Election Commission should immediately consider formation of a Vigilance Team comprising volunteers from various EMOs and representatives of various political parties. These teams will be engaged in scrutinizing the Electoral Roll of the respective areas under direct supervision of the District Election Officer and their work will be coordinated by the Thana Nirbahi Officer (TNO) at upazilla level. The Commission should go for immediate implementation of such a program for timely and effective completion of their activities for an accurate Electoral Roll acceptable to all. And, yes it is still possible.

Sadrul Hasan Mazumder is a Development Activist and a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.