

The Budget

We expect the budget session beginning today to be participated by all members of the parliament. For any move — though nobody said so directly — to boycott the session would not only be irresponsible but also politically damaging for any party that would attempt it. Hopeful signs of serious dialogue between the major actors in our political scene, especially between the leading figures of BNP and AL have given rise to a feeling that the budget session is likely to witness some serious exchange of views not only on the immediate financial and budgetary problems but on the more deep-rooted economic and social issues. We feel that a constructive discussion on the budget and sincere attempt to discuss the development problems of the country, with the temptation of playing to the gallery kept well under control, will not only lead to a very educative and productive budget session but may also sow the seeds of future co-operation between the two parties on issues that separate them now.

Let us be realistic. No budget is ever passed by consensus. The one that will be presented today will not be an exception. As the Finance Minister said on Tuesday "budget is a balancing of social conflicts", there will always be justifiable reasons to criticise a budget. The opposition must and should bring into the open all the shortcomings of that complex and critical "balancing act" that the budget constitutes. But what we insist upon is that after all the criticism, the overall judgement must be made on the basis of the possible and not only on the wishful thinking of the desirable. Herein lies the maturity of the democratic process that we have sacrificed so much to establish.

It is natural that the most widely discussed item of the budget will be the new taxes that it will impose. Our tendency here may well be to oppose any new tax. However, as it exists, our direct tax base at the moment is extremely narrow, and the likelihood of its immediate expansion is slim. Hence the dependence on indirect taxes is inevitable. It is in this context that all new proposals for taxes must be judged in. Much is made of the fact whether a budget is surplus or deficit. In fact there is an undeserved aura about a surplus budget, making it appear to be a success while in reality it may be something quite different. The real merit of a budget lies in its spending pattern. As reported so far in the press, education, once again, is likely to receive the highest allocation in the budget to be followed by defence. If it should be so, then the government should be commended for their stress on human resource development. Questions however may still be asked as to whether a judicious allocation of meagre resources is being made in other areas.

The budget, as can be expected, will give rise to many debates and many more controversies. That is the democratic way. What we would like to see is the debate on the budget being tuned into a matured and well thought out discussion on the economy itself. Let the opposition show their expertise on the complex issues of the budget and while they criticize, let them also come with alternative suggestions giving an idea to the public of the options that are available to us. It may not be a bad idea for the opposition to identify one or a few speakers on the budget. Instead of allowing everyone to speak — some of whom will leave much to be desired as speakers — it may prove to be a much better use to time, and not to speak of the quality of the debate itself, if someone of a particular group of MPs is identified as the opposition spokesmen on the budget, who we expect will possess the expertise and will undertake the necessary preparation in presenting the opposition view points on the budget.

Above everything else, we urge our parliamentarians not to forget for a moment what a serious business the budget is, and to treat this session as such.

What is Sugandha?

Three events have taken place in the Hare Road-Minto Road area during the past one month which have brought into question the manner in which political parties use or misuse state properties. The three events in question were not isolated ones, but more a part of a process going on for quite sometime, making the practice even more alarming. First, the 1992 council session of the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) was held at Sugandha, one of the prime minister's several offices, last Tuesday; few days earlier, several hundred people from Mirpur went to Sugandha for no other purpose than to join the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP); and last month, a crucial meeting of the Awami League's working committee was held at the official residence of the Leader of the Opposition at 29, Minto Road.

These sort of things have been going on for sometime, and both Sugandha and the residence of the opposition leader have been turned into virtual extensions of their respective party offices. The holding of the JCD council session or committee formation meeting inside the prime minister's office was perhaps the most objectionable one, since the JCD is not a government organ, nor can it claim to have any role in the administrative process simply by virtue of being the BNP's student wing. That council and gathering of new BNP recruits should, by any consideration, be held at BNP or JCD offices or premises hired for the purpose. To use the prime minister's office for what are fundamentally party affairs, tantamounts to misuse of even abuse of state properties. Similarly, the Awami League cannot give itself the right to hold party committee meetings in the leader's Minto Road residence for the simple reason that the property in question belongs to the state which has been assigned to the parliamentary leader of the opposition for official use.

One has to make a clear distinction between state or parliamentary functions and party affairs. It is one thing for people to go to Sugandha to seek audience with the prime minister, but it is quite another thing for people to go there to meet the chairman of the BNP to join that party. Holding of the election to the JCD's central committee at Sugandha is perhaps the most striking example of how state properties can be misused under a system which cannot make that distinction. But this obvious blurring of the dividing line does not bode well for the future of democracy in the country. A code of conduct ought to be worked out soon to prevent any more tax-payers' money being used to finance party activities.

Let Democratic Forum Offer New Answers to National Problems

THE stage is set, so it seems from outside, for the launching tomorrow of the Democratic Forum, a platform that is to bring together a group of intellectuals and leading figures from professional classes who feel the urgency to express their views on national affairs from time to time.

It is said that while a group of organisers will hold a preparatory meeting today, several hundred people will gather under a pandal tomorrow to get the Forum off the ground. So, what looks like a platform from outside may well be seen from inside as a movement, perhaps as a third force, but strictly in the intellectual sense.

The idea of promoting a third force in a democratic country is an attractive one when, as in Bangladesh, two major political parties do not necessarily speak for a cross section of professional elite — the so-called silent majority — and, somehow or other, are cut off from sources of new ideas, new concepts and new programmes.

In the case of Bangladesh, the two major parties, the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the opposition Awami League (AL) are also too dependent on their own old-style professional politicians to provide channels for new ideas from within their ranks. Again, being embroiled in a power struggle, each developing a siege mentality of its own, both demonstrate a limited capacity to take a fresh view of specific national problems. Both probably fear of running into new political risks by breaking away with their respective established policies.

Herein lies the room, plenty of room, for a third view. However, a third view should not necessarily promote a third force, especially in the context of politics in Bangladesh.

In this country, the need today is to influence the policies of both BNP and AL, to help them to make a fresh approach to problems facing the nation and, wherever possible, to promote a degree of broad consensus on, say, the campus violence, the Golam Azam issue, the Indemnity (Repeal) Bill and corruption.

The moment the proposed Forum starts talking or behaving as a third force, it is either shunned by the two major parties or suspected of being inspired by an extra-parliamentary force.

So, in order to influence the thinking of the two major parties, the Forum must gain their trust — about the hardest thing to win in Bangladesh politics — earn a measure of credibility and set up a mechanism of its own to ventilate its views among the people.

However, if one recalls the way the *Nagorik Samity*, a body of leading intellectuals who earnestly supported the pro-democracy movement during the last years of the Ershad rule, was coldshouldered by both BNP and AL, we do not know if and when the Forum will get an access to the ruling party or to the opposition.

Here, again, much of the success of the Forum would depend on its composition. Its views on various issues and strength. It could be either a committee of handful of intellectuals issuing press statements or a recognisable

pressure group, a special lobby, that enjoys national respect for its credibility and expertise in various areas.

To achieve this objective, the group must not be too concerned with getting access to BNP and AL. Instead, it should enter into sustained dialogues with special interest groups, such as university students, professional bodies in trade and industry, the NGOs and women. For all these years, these groups have been at the receiving end of endless lectures and sermons. It is time they started talking back. This is what a dialogue is all about.

If, just to give one example, a series of discussion between student leaders and prominent members of the Forum can produce some

venture. The question that will be uppermost in many minds is, will the Forum serve as a nucleus of a new political party? We are told that the answer to the question is in the negative. However, if several hundred people attend the launching of the Forum tomorrow, the question is bound to crop up again. The leaders of the Forum, whoever they are, must again answer the question, hopefully, in the negative.

Since a number of AL leaders who have been publicly critical of the organisation's chairperson, Sheikh Hasina, are associated with this venture, there is a clear danger that the Forum would be regarded as a platform for AL dissidents. In this sense, the emergence of the Forum could further weaken the opposition and, to that extent, seen as an unexpected political gift by Begum Khaleda Zia but as a threat by Sheikh Hasina.

No matter how one judges the AL's policies today or, for that matter, of the inability of Sheikh Hasina to perform her role as the leader of an alternative government, any move by the Forum to split or weaken the AL will only aggravate the divisiveness among the democratic forces in the country.

If Bangladesh needs a strong efficient and purposeful government, it also needs a determined opposition which plays a straightforward, not a devious role within the framework of parliamentary democracy. This means that the interests of the country may be best served by a strong two-party system, with other groupings and factions playing supportive and secondary roles.

It will be good for the Democratic Forum if this message comes out, loud and clear, when it is launched tomorrow.

AT HOME AND ABROAD

S. M. ALI

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new ideas, if not a comprehensive programme, for ending the campus violence, which are duly publicised through the media, the country will certainly hail this achievement.

In other words, the Forum must be prepared to deal with the core issues of our national politics, by talking directly with the people concerned, often without any publicity. If any success is scored in this kind of exercise, access to the leadership of both BNP or AL will come as a matter of course.

On balance, this may look like a fairly rosy picture of prospects facing the Democratic Forum, which obscures risks, possible pitfalls and some avoidable flaws in organising the

More than Just Family Antics in this Monarchy Grist

Derek Ingram writes from London

A string of disastrous marriages has put the British monarchy in the greatest danger since the abdication of Edward VIII in 1936. In some ways the crisis is now worse, as daily press publicity means that little can be done any more in private. In other times staff remained loyal and the court kept its secrets. Gemini News Service reports on the forces at work against the monarchy in Britain.



Charles and Diana
Their relationship falling apart?

IT is difficult to believe today that in the mid-1930s — when the then Prince of Wales fell in love with a divorced American, Wallace Simpson — the British press knew what was going on, but in deference to the monarchy published not a word.

In January 1936 the Prince became King Edward VIII — and still the press said nothing of the love affair. Not until the news appeared in papers overseas did newspapers in Britain break the story.

This was a time when the British accepted that the monarchy could do no wrong and to speak ill of members of the royal family was just not done.

Even after the abdication, which temporarily put great strain on the monarchy, the situation did not change. George VI, helped by the onset of World War Two soon afterwards, restored the equilibrium. Not until the 1960s did the monarchy become a real topic for discussion — as it had done, paradoxically, in the days of Queen Victoria.

Until recently, however, few institutions looked more secure in an insecure world than the British monarchy. Under a Queen who had won international respect during four decades at the head of a diverse, and often diverting, family, the continuation of the line well into the 21st Century appeared assured.

The monarch seemed to have adopted to the age of television and instant communication with skill, but it proved not to be so. The family had become too diverting, the publicity too glaring.

Suddenly, everything got out of hand. Even these days it is unusual to find so many wrecked or strained marriages

within one family as there now are in the House of Windsor.

Either they have all been disastrous matches or else the goldfish bowl life which all of them are forced to lead has proved unbearable.

Yet everything that has happened in the last few years — and much worse — has happened in the family's long history.

Edward VII, as Prince of Wales late last century, enjoyed his mistresses. His life style was well known in the closed circles of the court and to a limited extent outside. But in those days the working classes tipped their forelocks and accepted that the upper classes had their fun like everyone else.

In hypocritical Victorian times, you gossiped about sex and scandal, but you did not bring it into the open.

Yet the Victorian newspapers did poke fun at the Queen and her family, whereas under King George V (1910-1936), the monarchy could do no wrong. It was never criticised in public. Everything was kept under wraps.

Such lapses as there might be — the drinking habits of the King's son, the Duke of Gloucester, or the foibles of the younger Duke of Kent — were talked about in whispers. The press never pried into such matters.

And the court remained a

tight circle. Staff were firmly loyal, although their loyalty was not then put seriously to the test. Television did not exist and press and radio stuck by the rules.

When newspapers started looking at the royals' private lives and the appetite grew for television programmes and then books, the financial temptations were too great for members and ex-members of the staff to resist. Buckingham Palace lost control.

More recently, another factor has come into play. For reasons still unclear, a campaign to undermine the monarchy has been quietly gathering pace on the political right.

The antics of the younger members of the royal family have played into these people's hands. If the royal soap opera became irresistible to the tabloid press, the performance of Murdoch newspapers indicates something deeper at work than a mere desire to titillate readers.

While the Sun newspaper

lost no opportunity to exploit every angle of the royal lives, the Sunday Times played up more serious political aspects, such as the long-running differences between Margaret Thatcher when she was prime minister and the Queen.

The Sunday Times is now again at the centre of the Princess Diana uproar, serialising the book about her marriage while its editor, Andrew Neil, sounds off almost daily on radio and television.

Rupert Murdoch owns a large chunk of the British press, though he is neither Australian nor British but now an American citizen known for republican sympathies. Although the Times of London, under its more independent editor, Simon Jenkins, takes a somewhat different line, Times Newspapers seem generally to hint that the Queen, unbelievably, holds views too far to the left.

They would cite her long record of better relations with Labour leaders than with Tories, her support for Com-

monwealth Third World leaders, her resistance to Thatcher policies on South Africa, and her apparent dislike of the effect of Tory social policies on the weaker sections of the community.

Although Murdoch claims to be a non-interfering proprietor, if he opposed what his papers were doing his editors would take the hint.

Less explicable is the performance of Lord Rothermere, owner of the Daily Mail, which has been equally active in recent years in pushing royal gossip and which broke the news of the Duke and Duchess of York's impending separation.

He had always seemed strongly supportive of the monarchy. The Mail once carried under its title the words "For Queen and Commonwealth." They have long since disappeared and the paper now lacks enthusiasm for either.

Clearly, the British monarchy is in greater difficulty than at any time this century. The rift between Charles and Diana puts even the succession in doubt. There is a jinx on the firstborn in the British royal family. Historically, few have reached the throne.

DEREK INGRAM is Editor of Gemini News Service and was formerly Deputy Editor of the London Daily Mail.

OPINION

Human Rights Commissions (HRCs)

For sometime the Human rights commissions (HRCs) have been making high claims as to saving people here and there from the venal police, the unscrupulous and the crooked. Reportedly, the HRC people are paid handsome remuneration for the tiring and life-risking job they do (?) and in the eyes of the people held noble. But, the grim picture we get of the total society — makes us wonder if any HRC is existent in this country because any positive change regarding human rights is yet to be felt. The human rights are being perpetually jeopardized, without any hope of redemption in sight. People are growing doubtful if HRCs will ever be able to steer the society out of the clutches of wrong-doers. The common critical perception of HRCs' ineffectual role may be narrated as follows:

The landlessness of the traditional poor farmers are increasing day by day. The rich and influential people of rural and urban Bangladesh, are grabbing lands of the poor and powerless through different exploitative ploys. In this modern days too the users are comfortably managing their trades in the rural Bangladesh. Practically the police serves the interests of these rich and influential class. Gifts in kind or cash govern the rules and law of the land. Bribe is an ever pervading element in this society.

Enslavement of the poor through harassment by goons 'not obstructed by the police' and often entangling by prolonged court proceedings, has become everyday happening. Whatever it may appear on the surface, it is a moral 'Sahara' for the lower strata of the society.

The sub-human living in city slums /ghettos makes us believe that there is actually no endeavours to guarantee human rights in Bangladesh. People claim that these slums have become criminal dens.

Whatever be the allegations against the slum-dwellers, one feels hauntingly perturbed to find a great band of people living in utterly miserable condition. The HRC people, instead of bringing out mere human right books and supplying articles to different media, could have come down to the earth with their international connections to practically resolve the anti-human right issues.

The HRCs claim that the persecution of prisoners by the police have slid down. But they don't take in to account the real crime picture. We know that HRCs are not the stalwarts of any crime-prevention body. But when they claim to have championed a noble cause against the police repression, they are hiding the realities, (whether knowingly or unknowingly), hence giving an edge to the repressive forces. The police brutalities have been invincible.

The newspaper reports say that the murderers are moving freely in broad daylight. The police gives false reports. The goons threaten the victims not to speak out the truth. Most conspicuously, the HRC people keep mum about these. HRC people are busy organising mere seminars and symposia.

Even the Bangladesh Mahila Parishad has already made a precedent of forcing the otherwise permissive-to-criminals and rigid-to-the-victims institutions including the judiciary to bring a rich man's son to face justice.

The HRC people may notify and if needed persuade the PM, the Ministers to take necessary actions about untoward incidents occurring here and there. To the helpless people, it seems only the donors can enforce our government machineries behave. Sad and bitter though it may sound, the representatives of donors also frequently violate human rights in this country finding the people helpless.

The victims feel very much helpless. Presently the whole nation is held hostage in the hands of killers, looters, plunderers, goons and mastaans. HRCs are satisfied with the reports published by them in magazines and papers. Interestingly, their reports are yet to acquire the quality of investigative journalism.

The HRCs may work as catalyst to bring forth changes in the judiciary. They may intimate the donor agencies about human rights violations thus channelling funds for establishing human rights. They may, at least, raise an accusative finger.

The HRC reports reveal that the police are doing better in human terms whereas factually it is just the opposite. The people are facing exploitation and repression at the hands of local touts and goons. Reportedly, the police is either backing or not acting against these local touts and goons. The government officials also are not acting against the touts and goons. HRCs are playing the role of lame duck.

Encroachment upon the properties of the rural poor are sometimes highlighted by the HRC. Yet, it is interesting to note that the government officials can encroach upon poor man's property without paying compensation worth the name and HRC people come to no help. They seem to be pleased with their own living standards and good connections with bureaucrats and politicians.

An it is strongly felt that nobody is of any help including the HRC people. Under the circumstances, the saying that "God helps them those who help themselves" seems only solution and that painfully though, tantamounts to taking laws and their enforcements in own hands instead of depending on anybody.

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To the Editor...

Retrenchment of employees

Sir, Due to limited revenue income of the government and heavy financial constraint on our public exchequer our Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman has proposed retrenchment of one lakh employees but our Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina has opposed it.

M Saifur Rahman suggested the size of the government would have to be trimmed to ensure optimum use of limited resources. And Dr Kamal Hossain of Awami League opined the nation cannot afford mere opposition in the name of opposition.

Total loss in Adamjee Jute Mills from 1972 to 1992 stood at Taka 5000 crore. Losses in other public sector corporations, mills and factories amounted another Taka 10000 crore during the last twenty years. How long the public exchequer can feed the employees sitting idle? Where from would the money come?

For seventyfour years various governments of the former Soviet Union paid salaries to a section of people without any work. As a result the government treasury became empty and ultimately the Soviet Union itself was dissolved.

Bangladesh is beset with chronic economic problems, poverty and unemployment. Retrenchment of one lakh employees at random would in no way solve any problem. Rather it would invite violent public repercussion and create law and order situation.

We, however, strongly believe that if only five to ten thousand public servants, high

and mid-level officers and staff members of different government offices and public sector corporations are brought into book and strong disciplinary action taken against them for their alleged corruption, abuse of power, irregularities and negligence of duties — not only the public administration of the country would be streamlined, the revenue income of the government would be increased and law and order situation in the country would be improved, but also the socio-economic condition of the people would be revolutionalised.

Would the Prime Minister as well as the Leader of the Opposition kindly take effort to fulfil the long cherished desire of the people?

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Law and Order

Sir, The article of Mr SAMS Kibria on the alarming situation in the country was an excellent reading and a very timely one. It is an educational piece for all persons connected with enforcement of law and order. The article is moral boosting because a person of the author's stature has come up with the issue. Everything is not yet lost.

In some analysis, the situation which has alarmed Mr Kibria, was initiated in 1958 when autocratic regimes started to set root in these regions. Each one started with imaginary mandate to do 'good' for the people and not bothering to ask the people if they were interested in their own

'good'. There was no question of accountability. Only get the right men to tag along. Various elements got tagged with the succession of these regimes and joined in the competition of praising and supporting, completely ignoring the unsavoury sides.

What was the role of bureaucracy all these time? Didn't they help to strengthen and lengthen the anti-people regimes? Didn't they gain most from the succession of 'do-as-I-wish' dictator? Didn't they have the chance to point out to the masters the faults and after-effects of motivated actions? Didn't they, sensing the signs of setting sun, start to prepare for worshipping the rising one?

If our bureaucrats could be upright and be truly professional instead of being personally ambitious (to get a ministerial position, for example) no crooked regime could function for more than a year or so.

The alarming situation prevailing to-day will also change if the officials do their job with devotion and in a forthright manner. The people's representatives who are either ministers or leaders of various parties (with the exception of 'switched over politicians') are simple people of our country who have to learn various tricks of the trade from someone else. In some cases these helping hands are businessmen, and in most others, the official functionaries.

The rich and varied experience of Mr Kibria will give further direction and hope if he continues to write.

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