

JS Session

The autumn session of the Jatiya Sangsad (Parliament) convened yesterday amidst preparation by most of the opposition parties to take a tough line against the treasury bench on the question of the anti-terrorism bill that the government expects to get through the House during this session. There are two reasons why the opposition is so upset about this bill. One is that the bill is far too sweeping and against fundamental rights. The other reason for being so upset is the way in which the whole thing was done. The anti-terrorism ordinance was suddenly sprung and then promulgated, when that very bill was under the consideration of a special parliamentary committee. This was done in face of severe opposition in the parliament when it was placed before the last session. The opposition now feels that having failed to get it through in the House, the government has this time brought it into force through an ordinance and is trying to make it into a law. This newspaper commented earlier on the obvious harshness of the anti-terrorism bill and about the possibility of its misuse. There is also the fear of its political use, which the government has repeatedly denied.

The Indemnity Ordinance (Repeal) Bill, placed before the House by the Chief Whip of the opposition Md Nasim, continues to be another sore point between the ruling party and its biggest opponent in the parliament. After several postponements, the special committee which is supposed to draft a report for the House, is expected to seek another time extension to work out the report. The delay so far has been nothing more than a tactic to buy more time without any real chance of a breakthrough. If there were ever any possibility to reach a consensus in the parliamentary committee, it has now become more remote than ever before. A further postponement is not likely to increase the possibility of the committee to come to any agreement. Before the committee ends its work, both the BNP and the AL should seriously consider the consequences of sticking to their respective positions. We had suggested on several occasions before, and we do so at this stage, that a heart-to-heart exchange of views should take place between the AL and the BNP on the Indemnity issue. Can we really claim to establish a society of rule of law with this ordinance forming a part of our Constitution? On the other hand, is it now the proper time to resolve all our outstanding issues? These are real questions and must be answered like statesmen and not politicians.

There continues to be a nagging feeling about the lack of active participation in the parliament by the Leader of the House and some important ministers. The debate on the no-confidence bill during the last session saw an effective rebuttal by the Prime Minister to the points raised by the opposition. We hope her own experience will encourage her to give more time to the Sangsad. Whatever may be her incentive, for the sake of better output of this supreme representative body, we must, at the risk of sounding repetitive, say that a House without its leader's presence loses a lot of its effectiveness. It has been reported that the leader of the opposition herself plans to undertake a foreign trip in the coming few weeks. We hope that she can reschedule her trip, to give more time to this session. And for the future we request her to plan better, so that she does not have to absent herself during the session of the parliament. The presence of both these leaders not only adds to the seriousness of the debate but also makes it difficult for other members to absent themselves. Otherwise, the party MPs tend to take the need to participate in the parliament's proceedings lightly.

We express our ardent hope that members from both the treasury bench and the opposition will do less to distract the House from its main agenda and concentrate more on the urgent national problems. With the passage of each session, we expect the parliament to become more and more the centre of all political and social debates, making the need for mass movements increasingly unnecessary. The glamour and the attraction for the "street" should gradually be substituted by that of the parliament.

Three Cheers for a Poet

It is not often that we get an opportunity of applauding a poet who gains an international recognition. This chance now comes with the West Indies poet and dramatist Derek Walcott winning the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Among writers and authors who have won the world's best-known award, fiction writers have been in overwhelming majority, our Rabindranath Tagore, W B Yeats and T S Eliot being among notable exceptions. Would it be due to what one might say the lack of popular appeal of poetry as compared to more easily appreciated fiction that is responsible for the case of poets often going by default? Then, again, authors writing in English and other European languages have had an edge over possible candidates from Asia and Africa. Perhaps it is all a question of getting the right translation of the original work. It was only a genius like Tagore who was capable of translating the "Gitanjali" into English all by himself and winning the Nobel Prize for Literature as early as in 1913, some ten years before his early admirer in Britain, W B Yeats got his.

For a number of reasons, the choice of Walcott for the Nobel Prize has been a popular one. To start with, he is a great poet, a fact that once prompted the Soviet exile writer Joseph Brodsky, another winner of the prestigious honour, to complain that the continued indifference to Walcott underscored a refusal to admit that a great poet of the English language was a black man.

Walcott is neither the first nor the last black writer to win the Nobel Prize. But he may well be the rare one to draw inspiration for some of his poems from the fact he is a descendant of slaves brought to North America from Africa. This legacy combines his past heritage with the multi-racial life and his commitment to contemporary values that gives his writing a strength that is both universal and uniquely his own. Let Walcott live long and continue to give his best to literature. And let the Nobel Prize academy continue to raise the level of its global representation in the choice of its nominees.

Lack of Follow-up Actions Can Produce Inertia in Political Parties

POLITICS in Bangladesh moves on, from paradox to another, each situation wrapped in contradictions, often overshadowed by questions few can answer. This also means that every hopeful development is followed almost immediately by a backward step. It is not necessarily a case of being back to "square one", but there is the inevitable sense of inertia that blocks the forward movement.

There are quite a few examples which illustrate this phenomenon, both affecting the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the opposition Awami League (AL).

With both the parties, there have been promising developments. The AL has just had its Council Session and the stage is set for the BNP one. Broadly speaking, the AL session had been a successful one. At this moment, there are no reasons to think that the BNP won't also put up an impressive show either. After all, with their unchallenged leadership positions, both Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wajed handle reorganisations of their parties very much in the way they like, guided by their instinct and political judgement.

Here, let us take AL Council Session first. This paper has already commented favourably on certain aspects of its deliberation and, indeed, on some of its decisions. Having once suggested — perhaps the first newspaper to do so — that the AL-led opposition should regard itself as an "alternative government", with a shadow cabinet of its own, equipped with a think tank, we ought to be pleased that Sheikh Hasina has made these moves. Whether her moves were prompted by what she read in this paper or by the advice reportedly given to her by a distinguished Dhaka-based foreign envoy, along the same lines, make little difference. We should not necessarily subscribe to the notion that our national leaders often take a suggestion of a diplomat of an important friendly country more seriously than what may be said in the same vein in the columns of a newspaper.

It is the lack of follow-up action, even clarification, that leads us wondering how the so-called shadow cabinet or the advisers would be functioning in the new set-up. In fact, there are questions which have remained unanswered. Would the members of the so-called shadow cabinet be the spokespersons of the opposition on various issues when (and if) they are raised at the parliament? In line with the system followed in the House of Commons in the British parliament, would they be regarded as front-benchers and potential ministers if (and when) AL forms the govern-

ment? Again, should the shadow cabinet include members of other political parties which belong to the AL-led opposition?

Advisers, nominated or appointed by Sheikh Hasina, also occupy a somewhat grey area in the slowly-evolving structure of the party. Do they constitute the much-needed Think Tank that we had pleaded for in this column? Whatever the answer, do these advisers function individually or as a team, with each one assigned a field of specialisation? Furthermore, do these advisers provide some guidance to different spokespersons in specific areas, in coordination with various sub-committees, or only to the chairperson?

It may well be somewhat demoralising for these advisers if they discover that apart from being invited by the chairperson from time to time for a chat, they perform no role in the decision-making process of the party or its future socio-economic agenda that could serve as the manifesto of the organisation at the next election. What these advisers should do, if they have not done so already, is to get together as a

watching the last phase of the US presidential election. It is undoubtedly a bad time for the AL leader to accept an invitation for a foreign tour, a move that reflects, as critics would say, a lack of urgency that Hasina attaches to the parliamentary activities in general and to the system that she herself did much to put into effect during the AL's council meeting.

These are some of the uncertainties which cast their shadow over the activities of AL in coming months, threatening to weaken, if not undo, some of the initiatives taken during the council.

In one way or another, these uncertainties will get linked to the biggest challenge facing the AL in recent years. It is the possible casing out — or expulsion, if one should call a spade a spade — of Kamal Hussain from AL, or the move by the veteran former member of the presidium to set up a "new" Awami League or the continuance of a stalemate that goes on to weaken to cohesion of the party from within to the point when AL will be less than justified to describe itself as an alternative government.

AT HOME AND ABROAD

S. M. ALI

group and talk things over as to how they should function and, indeed, through what mechanism (including the research facilities), in order to perform a constructive role not just for AL but for the country which so badly needs an intellectual debate on the whole range of issues facing Bangladesh today.

Some of these questions should get clarified in time, hopefully, before enthusiasm, inside and outside the party, in the new structure fizzles out. In this context, the current session of the Jatiya Sangsad should help in focussing on the role of the so-called members of the shadow cabinet, whether or not one regards them as spokespersons on various issues, a number of which would be reflected in the bills ready for presentation to the JS.

However, there is a disappointment — indeed, a major one.

It is reported that the AL chairperson and the Leader of the Opposition, Sheikh Hasina will be away in the United States, starting some time next week, for nearly a month, attending a seminar on leadership affairs and

On the whole issue, Hasina's reaction may well be nothing more than a shrug — by now, we all know her style — dismissing Dr Hossain as an individual who will be cast aside by history when he is out of the organisation for one reason or another.

What the AL chairperson may not say openly but probably she knows in her heart is, Hossain is not only an important individual, but, at this moment in AL's history, he also represents a phenomenon, a trend and a mood. If he represents the generation gap that separates him from the younger comrades of Hasina, he has also made himself a mouthpiece for inner party democracy at all different levels of the organisation.

It is impossible to question the validity of Hossain's position. Unfortunately, the method — or a series of moves — adopted by this distinguished lawyer are wrong, almost deplorably ill thought-out and provocative. To outsiders, they seem almost designed to force the hands of Sheikh Hasina either in throwing him out of AL or in accepting whatever the former member

of the presidium wants her to do with regard to his political demands.

Even on the setting up of the Democratic Front, which we have supported in this column, there was a need, an urgent need, for long consultations between Hasina and Hossain, for the latter to convince the AL chairperson that the new body would help in promoting the causes their common organisation believe in. If such a consultation which we are sure did not take place had failed to reach a consensus, the choice before Hossain was to shelve the move at least for the time being. This is what party discipline is all about.

The former member of the presidium probably had his own reasons for attending a series of seminars and meetings in the West just when his presence was needed at the Council Session. However, people cannot help questioning his sense of priorities or wondering if he shies away from facing an open deliberation to shirk out complex issues.

Again, all those press interviews given to a number of Dhaka newspapers, including The Daily Star, by Hossain by telephone from Paris and New York, discussing his position in AL probably made good reading, but they reflected poor political judgements on his part. Sheikh Hasina made a mistake in not taking Hossain's permission before appointing him as an adviser, but it certainly did not make sense when the former presidium member criticised the new move as a "colonialist legacy".

All said and done, Kamal Hossain is an asset for AL. There is still time for Hasina to make use of his undoubted talents, expertise and connections with international organisations. But he has come dangerously close to being accused of committing a breach of party discipline at a time cohesiveness inside AL is just as important as inner democracy.

With the stage set for its own Council Session, the ruling BNP should watch the scenario inside AL with interest, with the awareness that it offers some lessons for the party in power.

The BNP has its own share of in-fighting, with some minister becoming more equal than others, not necessarily a healthy phenomenon in a parliamentary system. The need for giving the ruling party a new sense of commitment all way down the line, based on a revised socio-economic agenda, is just as important as its realisation that its success in office must be measured by a positive yardstick, not on the basis of the negative performance of the opposition.

Campaigners Win as Jailed Journalist is Freed

by David Robie writes from Manila

For 12 years, supporters of Filipino journalist Satur Ocampo campaigned for his freedom from detention. Regarded by the military as a top leader of the left-wing National Democratic Front he was denied bail rights. He was accused of rebellion, never properly charged in open court, and not convicted of any political offence. An international campaign to free him, reports Gemini News Service, has finally succeeded.

THE Manila National Press Club, a six-storeyed building wedged between the Pasig River and the ancient Spanish walled quarter of Intramuros, boasts many stories. Among the most famous is how former club president Satur Ocampo addressed his colleagues and the escaped his military captors. He slipped down the backstairs to a getaway car.

Ocampo was renowned as a crusading journalist and political opponent of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos. He languished in military detention for more than 12 years until an international campaign led to his release in September.

As a victim of state persecution, Ocampo ironically almost served the maximum penalty for rebellion without ever having been charged in open court or found guilty of this political offence — or any other crime.

His wife, Bobbie Malay, was also detained for several years and then released on humanitarian grounds. Both had been barred the right to bail. In spite of the return to democracy in the Philippines on the wave of popular power in

1986, the military retains extraordinary powers in dealing with political dissenters like Ocampo.

Ocampo, who had just celebrated his 53rd birthday in detention, found his case being discussed in the national conference of Philippine journalists in August. Secretary-general Leo Santiago said he would appeal to President Fidel Ramos to "end this injustice".

The non-partisan Friends of Satur Civil rights group sent pleas for his release to President Ramos and Chief Justice Andres Narvasa.

The group said: "Political dissenters like Satur continue to be charged with common crimes instead of rebellion, obviously to deny them their right to bail.

"Whether there is legal

cleverness or unmitigated malice, the end result of this tactic is unjust to the accused."

On two recent visits to the Philippines I sought permission from the military authorities to visit Ocampo in prison. Both times I was turned down. Instead, I spoke to his brother, Lito Ocampo, a photo-journalist for Human Rights Update, and officials involved in the case.

On his release, Ocampo appealed to the government to free the "unnamed farmers and workers" jailed for their political beliefs "rather than the big-wigs."

Ocampo's struggle against military repression began when he and a small group of journalists, including Bobbie Malay, escaped arrest after Marcos declared martial law in

September 1972. At the time, Marcos purged the news media, shutting outspoken newspapers and jailing journalists.

When Ocampo was forced underground, he was president of the Business-Economic Reporters Association of the Philippines, and secretary of the National Press Club. Ocampo began organising against the Marcos dictatorship. He forged links with other opposition groups, including the clandestine groups that founded the left-wing National Democratic Front in 1973.

Three years later, he was arrested by the military and tortured for a week. According to accounts by his colleagues, he was "subjected to electric shock; parts of his body were

burned with cigarettes; kicks and slaps, fist and karate blows rained on his body. He was held in solitary confinement, first for nine months in 1976 and then for five months in 1980."

It took two years before he was charged with rebellion, along with other political detainees, before a special military tribunal. Although the court heard the case over seven years, the prosecutor was unable to prove Ocampo guilty.

Marcos was overthrown in 1986 and Ocampo's case was put on the back burner by the military authorities. During this period, Ocampo established himself as a spokesman for the country's political detainees, exposing widespread and systematic torture by the military.

Two years before Cory Aquino came to power, a major international campaign was launched in an attempt to free

Ocampo.

Among organisations that supported the call were Amnesty International and the Brussels-based International Federation of Journalists, along with groups in Britain, Canada, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Switzerland and the United States.

In 1984 the Defence Secretary Juan Ponce Enrile called on Marcos to free Ocampo, but the dictator refused. The following year, Ocampo escaped from his military escorts at the National Press Club during the organisation's annual elections.

Late in 1986 Ocampo and Bobbie Malay made public appearances — he as chief negotiator and she as chief-of-staff — for the NDF negotiating team for peace talks with the Aquino government. The NDF offered a ceasefire and new peace talks if the Aquino government declared the removal of US bases by September 1991. Aquino rejected the offer.

However, the peace talks soon stalled in the 1989. Ocampo and Malay were arrested. The military presented Ocampo and Malay as "top leaders" of the NDF, yet refused to charge them with either rebellion or subversion and barred them for the right to bail.

To the Editor

Remembering Mr Saleheen

Sir, In the Holy Quran, it is stated in Sura Ambiyaa (21) Ayat-35 "Every soul shall have a taste of Death: and we test you by evil and by good by way of trial: To us you shall be returned!"

Death of a person whom we love and cherish, whom we hold in reverence, is difficult and painful to accept. Mr Musfeq-us-Saleheen, was a revered man not only in his profession, banking, but also amongst many who knew him as a person.

His sudden demise on 11th September in Brompton Hospital, London came as a shock to the banking circle here and to his friends and acquaintances. He was suffering from lung cancer. Last year he underwent by-pass heart surgery and recovered, but the damage was already done. Long years of constant smoking had badly affected his heart's arteries and lung. Although he stopped smoking after the by-pass surgery, there was nothing anyone could do about the spreading cancer in his lungs. He expired at the age of 64 leaving behind a record of four decades of banking career, starting as a young probationary officer of Imperial Bank in 1950 and ending as consultant and former founding Managing Director of IFIC Bank Ltd.

Distinguished personality Mr Saleheen was first an impeccable gentleman of unblemished character. Cordiality and politeness were integral part of his nature. He would stop and ask even his very junior colleagues about their family and problems, and they, in

turn, found in him a comforting guardian.

He was always uncompromising to what was unethical and unjustified. There was none who could take an undue advantage from him. Apart from his closest friends, few knew much about him. He was unusually demure about his life and achievements. There were periods of unbearable personal tragedies which befell him but he accepted that with patience and endurance.

I came to know Mr Saleheen when we travelled together to the northern part of the country in early 1986 in connection with some official matters. We had a brief stopover in Rajshahi. At the time of the year, Rajshahi bore the brunt of dry river beds, dusty wind and biting cold. In the early morning, we were strolling in the lawn of Parjatan motel. The sun was slightly up in the horizon and the weather misty. We talked over some details of manpower planning at the branches. Walking beside him in the cold, I could visibly feel the warmth of his gentle personality. He spoke in a clear soft tone which carried the depth of his knowledge and wisdom.

The demise of Mr Saleheen is a marked loss not only to the banking profession but to the society in general. He was an epitome of a generation where goodness of human nature, cordiality of behaviour, uncompromising integrity of character were held in high esteem — the very qualities which are now defunct in the society.

Mr Saleheen was by all accounts a righteous soul. And of the righteous soul, it is

revealed in Sura Al-Fajr (89) Ayat 27-30:

"Oh soul at peace Return to your Lord well pleased and well meaning. Enter you among my servants Enter you my paradise."

Khurram Malik IFIC Bank Colony Agrabad, Chittagong.

Requisition of motor vehicles

Sir, When nothing works, one reaches the climax of his frustration. When his representation, his deputation, his appeal and all other accepted channels of approach unfortunately do not produce results, he sits glum cursing his fate for having born in such a country where he is under 'persuasion' at every point. Out of utter desperation he decides to seek interview with the top executive — in this case the Hon'ble Prime Minister.

Before things are taken to the Prime Minister for redress, attention of the authorities are invited through your column. This is in regard to the requisitioning of cars of a private law abiding citizen organisation in Bangladesh. Why the police authorities should requisition the motor vehicle belonging to a private individual/company and take it away straight from the road putting the owner(s) at lunch? Are they competent enough to do so under a Government which professes to be democratic,

particularly at a time when there is neither a war nor an emergency, neither a catastrophe nor a disaster? Where is the Act, if there be any, and what are its readings? Then there are more than 5000 vehicles in Govt. Pool of various Ministries, attached subordinate offices and sector corporations. The requirements can be well met out this pool without disturbing the innocent law abiding citizens.

Members of one of the Chambers of Commerce in Dhaka went on Deputation to the Hon'ble Home Minister who was kind enough to agree with the recommendations of the Chamber and said in March last that the authorities in the Police will be duly informed. Even five months are not enough for the circular to reach the Traffic police and they have been continuing to hit the owners of the vehicle as hard as ever. The other day a vehicle was returning after dropping the children, it was taken away from the crossing of Fakirpool without giving the driver a chance to take the children back home. Poor kids waiting in vain till 10pm had to return home in a public conveyance. The car was sent to the Pool but when it was returned after two days two of its knobs were missing. How long will this type of 'persecution' of law abiding citizens will continue? Let this stop once for all in the name of democracy, in the name of human rights, in the name of all that is noble and sacred in the world.

Abu M. Faiz Azampur, Dhaka

OPINION

Literacy

Shahabuddin Mahtab

First, I would like to refer to your second editorial of September 8th. It was a thought provoking one, especially when you urge for the literacy campaign in the shop floors, factories and the industrial labour sector.

The relation between illiteracy in the shop floor and low productivity/violence has not been adequately researched, with a view to policy planning. The large concentration of workers in the factory area can enable us to take schools to them, at times convenient to them, and as a part of adult literacy/mass education programme. For new workers, the knowledge of the three Rs has to be one of the requirements. The workers already employed may be allowed a period of one year to learn the three Rs. The present writer as a young officer in the year 1957 tried to enforce the requirements of the three Rs amongst the Railway Mail Service porters, and was fairly successful. The Post Office porters were required to read the labels on the mail bags, so that they could sort out the postal bags, and be fully functional.

The very low literacy rates of our women folk, have seriously affected our efforts to eradicate illiteracy. Our literacy rate for men is about 33% and that of women is exactly

half, i.e. about 16%. Then again the literacy rate amongst the rural women folk is only one third, to that of the urban area.

"In the traditional culture of Bangladesh, women bear the brunt of poverty and ignorance, much more than their counterparts" [Ms Salma Khan]. From the age of 7-8 years, the female child is tied to the household work, and when she is 12 to 13 years of age, she is married off. Our female education is an indicator of our very low rate of development (nearly a negative one). The existing situation will improve, when we are able to recruit more female teachers for our primary schools.

The economy cannot stem off, unless we have a literacy rate between 40% and 50%. We have a far greater social reward, when a female child is educated. The "multiplier" effect makes a greater thrust, when a sister, a daughter, or a mother is educated.

It is in the minds of men; their commitment, sincerity and genuine concern, that can lead us to a literate female population. We have to dedicate ourselves, for the substance of education, rather than the sermons. We need more hard work, rather than the long lectures, dished out on ceremonial occasions.