

Politics of Consensus will Enhance Role of Parliament

Doubts about ADB Lending

The 26th annual meeting of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) held in Manila last week, ended on a note of discord on the question of augmenting its resources to enable the bank to keep lending beyond next year.

This event is likely to increase the misgivings in the developing countries that the West's pre-occupation with domestic economic issues as also its imperatives in extending massive final assistance to Russia and other countries in the former Eastern bloc, might cause worsening of the global aid scenario.

Many countries in Asia consider that ADB's outlook on aid is attuned to the development needs of the region. To them at least, it is important that the bank command adequate resources so that it could not only sustain the present level of lending but also increase it to meet the growing needs of the region.

There are additional reasons why the bank needs to improve its fund situation. Vietnam will soon gain access to ADB financing, as it seems likely that the IMF, after a lapse of about eight years, will now lift its embargo on lending to Hanoi. The annual meeting also agreed in principle to admit six former Soviet Union republics into the bank.

Holding the view that some ADB funds might have been wasted, the US delegation at the annual meeting wanted an independent enquiry into the bank's loan portfolio. According to the demand, the ADB authorities have set up a task force. The task force was given six months to submit its findings.

At the end of the meeting, some hopes were expressed that differences over the issue of capital increase could be sorted out through follow-up talks. A senior US delegation member also is said to have indicated informally that the United States' attitude towards the proposed capital increase was positive but that there was no need to take decision in a hurry.

A prolonged stand-off will lead ADB's future lending programme into uncertainty. The bank may have to cut down its lending as early as in 1994, unless the issue is resolved by the third quarter of this year. There are talks that lending from ADB's regular loan window could drop to three billion dollars in 1995, which would be one billion dollars less than in 1992.

Independent Eritrea

Addis Ababa has been correct in accepting the independence of Eritrea, until recently, a part of Ethiopia. There was hardly any choice left for the landlocked African country which had governed Eritrea, often ruthlessly, after the tiny state of three million people, bordering Red Sea, came under one colonial control after another.

In 1952, the United Nations awarded this country to Ethiopia as part of a loose federation. But Haile Selassie formally annexed the country, touching off a rebellion that continued and got more ferocious over the decades. This is what united the people of Eritrea, half Muslim and half Christian, against the Marxist regime. The success of the freedom battle of Eritrea was assured when President Mengistu Haile Mariam fled the country. Finally, the referendum held in Eritrea late last month, where the verdict, as expected, was in favour of independence settled the issue once for all.

The most immediate question relates to the economic viability of the new state. While welcoming the independence of this tiny African nation from colonialism, we join others in hoping that two countries — Ethiopia and Eritrea — will open up new channels of co-operation on the basis of complete equality and interdependence. As a landlocked country, Ethiopia needs the outlet to the Red Sea as provided by its former colony. On the other hand, the new rulers in Asmara, the capital of the new country, would need economic co-operation and trade with Addis Ababa whose resourceful people have much to offer in putting the past behind.

In this respect, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) which is based in Addis Ababa should have a role to play in promoting co-operation between the two countries within the framework of regional projects.

Some analysts argue that the independence won by Eritrea marks the first successful move in redrawing the boundaries of African states and that this can set a process in motion in other countries, such as Somalia, Katangese in Zaire or in Tuaregs in Mali. The answer may well lie in giving these people more autonomy than they enjoy today, like the way Nigeria resolved the Biafra issue in a sensible manner, after years of senseless killing. Africa has known enough bloodshed. It does not need more, even if a rebellion to change a frontier may, on the face of it, seem a justified one.

THE budget session of the Parliament begins today. Apart from the press, few people in the country are excited about it. It is also doubtful if the press attaches as much importance to it as it did even a year ago. The reason is not far to seek. The Parliament is no longer seen as the centre of the nation's political life. In a parliamentary system it was expected that the politics of the country will revolve round the Parliament. After all, in a system in which the government derives its mandate and strength from the people through the Parliament it is only natural that the deliberations in the House as well as the consensus and compromises reached on different issues in the course of its proceedings will be decisive in shaping the policies of the government. It is a matter of profound regret that this has not happened in Bangladesh.

Following the pattern of the presidential system of the previous regimes it has virtually ceased to have any decision-making role. Without the participation of the leader of the House it is no longer considered very important even as a debating society. Will the government seize the opportunity provided by the current budget session? I believe there is still time to return to a truly parliamentary system. The nation wants it. Indeed, they fought for it. They have had bitter experience with the presidential system which tends to accentuate the concentration of power in one person. They want the politics of consensus and the sharing of power for which the parliamentary system is eminently suited. If we look at the situation in some of the South Asian countries we should be thankful to God that in terms of

race, language, culture, history and heritage the people of this country are more homogeneous than any other country in South Asia. We are, therefore, well placed to devote all our energies to the task of building the nation without the distraction of internal problems such as those faced by India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bhutan. We must, however, guard against those forces which might divide the nation artificially. The Parliament can play a crucial role in ensuring the nation's cohesion and unity. What should we do to return to the parliamentary system in both letter and spirit? First and foremost, the Prime Minister will have to attend the session and take part in its debates. This will earn her the support and appreciation of all those who still hope to see a healthy democratic system of government in the country. Following her lead, I am sure, ministers and members will find it more worthwhile to attend the meetings of the Parliament. The opposition will also feel that street agitation is not the only option available to them. Their voices will be heard with attention within the House. The possibility of accommodating their views and concerns will encourage a more positive mood. The government leaders are often heard to say that the opposition is resorting to the disruptive tactics of hartals and street rallies. Where else could the opposition, if one may ask, go to press their points? If the Parliament provides them the opportunity to articulate their views and enter into dialogue with the government, the propensity to resort to street action may diminish. The most important prerequisite, therefore, is to make it the centre of national

politics. Obviously the Prime Minister cannot expect this to happen if she is flying around the country in helicopter, to harangue the opposition when the Parliament is in session. It is the constitutional role of the opposition to subject the activities of the government to searching and critical review. A critical comment about the government is neither an unfriendly act nor a conspiracy against the national interest. Only dictators want the Parliament to be a piece of decoration in which all sides of the House must sing the dictator's praise. The next step, if I may humbly suggest, is to make an-

other attempt, a more determined one, to implement the pre-election joint decisions of the three coalitions of political parties which fought against the autocratic regime of Ershad. The government should realise that it is essentially a question of good faith on its part. They may continue to be evasive about the commitments made in the joint blue-print but this will not help the government's image. Not only the BNP's honour but its credibility is at stake. In fact the government has lost quite a bit of its shine on account of their failure to honour their commitments. The use of the radio and television to give publicity to the activities of the Prime Minister and other ministers is doing no good to their image. They should pause for a moment to reflect on the public response to the use of these media by Ershad and his wife and ministers. The people got

ON THE RECORD by Shah AMS Kibria

fessed murderers. The government will not only strengthen respect for law but in the process they will bring about a basic change in the political climate of the country. In fact this will be a major step in assuaging the hurt emotions of vast number of people and paving the process of reconciliation of the nation. BNP can get the credit for it. This will, I am sure, engender the spirit of compromise and accommodation instead of the current politics of bitterness and conflict. On the Golam Azam issue, for example, the government reached an understanding with the opposition. Why is it not being honoured? Is there any doubt in anybody's mind that Golam Azam was a raskar who fought tooth and nail against the emergence of Bangladesh? His activities were there for the whole world to see. Perhaps the raskars and die hard collaborators will take a

different view. But what is the government's constraint? Why should the government, which claims to be heir of a freedom fighter's mantle, be hesitant in putting this man to trial as a collaborator? We have not had a serious debate on the law and order situation in the country. Nor have we had a genuine attempt to look at the situation on the university campuses. Is it absolutely impossible to reach some sort of consensus on these questions? Criminals and terrorists have no political parties. They are friends to nobody. Those who are helping the government party today will turn against them as soon as they lose power. No one should depend on their loyalty because they have none. The debate in the House must not be the routine exercise in which the opposition attacks and the government tries to fend off the attacks. In the midst of tactical battle the substance is lost. Instead they should apply their mind to seek answers to these problems. The public, I am sure, will judge their performance by the seriousness of their analysis of the issues and their maturity of judgement and constructive approach. Strident attack and equally strident response will only lower the public esteem of the Parliament as an institution.

The budget will naturally be the focus of the session. But the ordinary people, I am afraid, are no longer terribly excited about the budget. Newspapers will publish the finance minister's statement. By now, the people know that he gets his inspiration from the donors and the World Bank-IMF experts. They are not therefore surprised that their day-to-day concerns do not figure in the preparation of the budget. The government's propaganda machine will be mobilised to put the spotlight on the so-called macro-economic issues on which it claims success. But the grinding poverty, the vast number of unemployed youth, the uneconomic price of farm products, the plight of the domestic industries due to the liberal import policy and many other problems will be relegated to the background as merely peripheral issues. Supporters of the BNP will issue statements praising the budget while the opposition leaders will criticize it. Wise editorials will be written to highlight the merits and demerits of the budget. All this is done year after year with no variations, as if a broken record is being played. For a few days, this will fill the space in the newspaper, signifying, in Shakespeare's words, nothing. That, as I have seen so often, is all that happens in the budget session. The people do not feel that the Parliament and the government are seriously addressing their real concerns.

Has there been a serious attempt by the Parliament to identify the cause of unemployment in the country and some possible steps to relieve the situation? Or the cause of the negative investment climate? Or, why does our literacy rate remain one of the lowest in the world? What concrete actions have been initiated by the authorities to speed up project implementation? What about a thorough overhaul of the bureaucracy? We need a dialogue among our elected representatives to find solutions to these problems, not a tactical exercise along party line. Can our leaders rise to the occasion?

What we do not know yet — and this is what we should get during the budget session — is the position taken by the opposition on the country's relationship with the donor agencies, on the whole range of issues, from aid dependency to trade liberalisation, leading to some kind of devaluation of our currency to the withdrawal of all forms of agricultural subsidies. The AL's position — its alternative agenda, if we call it so — should be outlined by someone who is seen, if not formally identified, as the opposition's spokesman on economic affairs, with the help of statistics and facts. Here, we can do without rhetorics or, for that matter, without an outright attack on whatever the administration has done in past two years. The major parties may be nowhere near reaching a national consensus on basic problems. However, a constructive debate on our economic issues may well help in identifying a common ground of shared concerns, ranging from peace on the industrial front to the removal of obstacles to privatisation. If we can find this common ground, the JS session, starting today, may mark a new beginning in our parliamentary democracy.

Let the Opposition Offer a New Agenda on Economic Issues

THE session of the Jatiya Sangsad (JS), opening today, offers a fresh chance to the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the opposition Awami League (AL) to give new lease of life to parliamentary democracy which, by all accounts, has been marginalised in the political life of the nation.

Like the search for a national consensus on basic issues, the expectation may prove elusive. However, independent experts and the non-partisan media must still emphasise the need for a new approach on the part of both BNP and AL, in the hope that the message may just get through, at some levels of the two parties. Unfortunately, there are plenty of grounds for scepticism. From within the leadership of the two parties, there have been strident sharp exchanges, with neither side showing any flexibility, leading to a rise in tension right across the political scenario in the country. This is further accentuated by vocal calls by some opposition leaders to take to the street agitation — we all know what it involves — for the realisation of several demands, including a four-point accord signed between the two parties. In such a situation, the opposition finds it politically expedient to take up issues — virtually any issue — which

provide some ammunition against the administration, regardless of their consequences. In immediate terms, herein lies the apprehension that the 72-hour strike, starting on Tuesday, by Srantik Karmachari Oikya Parishad (SKOP) may just get a nod, if not open support, from the AL. This will be contrary to the plea made by various trade bodies in the country — indeed by this paper — to all concerned, especially the opposition, to depoliticise their approach to the SKOP move. If parliamentary democracy

is to get a new lease of life, it is the current JS session that must become the focal point of the entire national debate, covering the whole range of issues, a debate that is substantive rather than rhetorical, programme-oriented instead of being an exercise in mutual recriminations. Such a debate may or may not produce a national consensus, but it will at least raise the level of parliamentary discussion and let the people know what positions are held by various parties. Critics of the government blame the ruling party for turning the parliament into a lifeless body, for the continued

erosion of its strength. In this respect, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia who is also the Leader of the House has come in for repeated — and, indeed, valid — criticisms for her frequent absences from the House and for her unwillingness to participate in debates. One would have thought that here is an opportunity for the opposition to turn the lapses, almost bordering on blunders, of the ruling party to its advantage. For one thing, it can take every chance of outlining its policies and pro-

Sometimes they blame the prevailing system for preventing them from playing their role as parliamentarians. The system is criticised from another perspective. Here, the complaint comes from young JS members, the so-called back-benchers in the major parties about what many of them call the lack of inner democracy within their groupings, about the relative absence of interaction between the leadership and the rank and file on organisational matters as well as on policy issues. This poses a more serious problem for AL than for BNP,

AT HOME AND ABROAD S. M. ALI

partly because with the emergence of the Democratic Forum (DF), it is very much a subject for open discussion among a cross-section of opposition supporters and partly because there are many young AL parliamentarians who regard themselves as part of an alternative government, but without getting any preparation to play such a role. These constraints are there. But they are not so serious as to prevent the AL opposition in the parliament from presenting its alternative agenda on specific issues. Since the main concern of the current session is the presentation of the annual budget,

grammes and demonstrate its grip over the challenges facing the country. In other words, it would display its preparedness as a cohesive constructive alternative government, ready to run the administration when (and if) elected to power. A number of AL leaders have offered this writer a variety of reasons why the opposition has not so far made much headway in this direction. One excuse given is, unless the government offers a policy in details, through an in-depth exposition, the opposition has little to say in response, little to place on record as an alternative agenda on a specific issue.

enchantment with the position taken by the donors. What we do not know yet — and this is what we should get during the budget session — is the position taken by the opposition on the country's relationship with the donor agencies, on the whole range of issues, from aid dependency to trade liberalisation, leading to some kind of devaluation of our currency to the withdrawal of all forms of agricultural subsidies. The AL's position — its alternative agenda, if we call it so — should be outlined by someone who is seen, if not formally identified, as the opposition's spokesman on economic affairs, with the help of statistics and facts. Here, we can do without rhetorics or, for that matter, without an outright attack on whatever the administration has done in past two years. The major parties may be nowhere near reaching a national consensus on basic problems. However, a constructive debate on our economic issues may well help in identifying a common ground of shared concerns, ranging from peace on the industrial front to the removal of obstacles to privatisation. If we can find this common ground, the JS session, starting today, may mark a new beginning in our parliamentary democracy.

It is all part of setting a new tone that the opposition should suggest specific clear-cut options, the so-called alternatives, to the policies formulated by the government, under the supervision of Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman. The most crucial question here concerns the Finance Minister's "abject surrender," as one AL leader recently put it, to the conditionalities imposed by the World Bank and other aid agencies. On this issue, opinions among experts here are indeed sharply divided, with even the minister often expressing his own dis-

TO THE EDITOR...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

SKOP's research activities Sir, The new economic concept of Share Economy developed by Prof Weitzman of MIT (Star, April 29) made interesting reading. It is presumed that top inner council in SKOP have read it. In view of SKOP's activities vitally affecting the nation, the public would be very much interested in SKOP's views on this hypothesis, assuming SKOP have well equipped research facilities at its disposal, considering its influence on the national economy. How much is this concept applicable to developing countries? cannot understand it myself, therefore cannot support SKOP. Here is an appeal to SKOP: please reduce the communication gap. A Mawaz Dhaka

Traffic hazards Sir, I have noticed three kinds of traffic hazards which must be corrected immediately as suggested below: 1. Narrow groves must be cut along the length of roads to mark rickshaw lanes; these will prevent rickshaws from straying but will be harmless to other modes of transport. This will cut road-painting cost. 2. Sharp-edged, pointed and long objects must not be allowed to move without protective covers; even so, these objects, for instance CI sheets, rods, electric poles, must only be transported vertically for maximum safety. 3. Zebra-crossing should be removed from road junctions, intersections and curves as these places remain crowded and vehicles taking

left-turn do not slow down. Zebra-crossings should be placed away from these points. I suggest the concerned departments of the Government should gain practical experience on the above facts for better understanding. M Ahmad Dhaka

No vandalism, please Sir, It appears from the incidence on the 25th April that act of vandalism is making its way into the present day politics. This is an oblique reference to the happening at the Shishu Academy on the day of sit-in demonstration by the Nirmul committee. The act of vandalism was conspicuous on that day though the demonstration was meant to be peaceful. The damage caused to the Academy by some agitated activists or supporters bears the fact that the sanctity of peaceful demonstration, now-a-days, is at stake. The academy does not belong to any political party, it is like any other national property which should be preserved and protected by every sane citizen. As usual, many vehicles were also damaged, so were many people injured, which also showed how a situation could get out of control due to few evil elements taking undue advantage. Both the government and the opposition should show utmost respect to each other and must also bridle their ill feeling against each other, be-

cause political tolerance is essential for the nourishment of our budding democracy. In no way should any act of vandalism be encouraged or be promoted by any quarter as it does not conform to the norms of a peaceful demonstration. Moreover, the law enforcement agency should be cautious in their act too as anything provocative on either side could incite unwanted incidence. In my view such kind of incidence in future will not doubt depreciate the effort of Nirmul Committee and the lurking opportunists, will lose no chance to reap the benefit of the situation. Therefore, we must pray and hope that no such disorderly occurrence would repeat. But I also fear, if this trend of vandal act continues in the name of protest, then it could be seen as a premonitory sign of sad demise of our hard earned democracy. Md Jalaluddin Iqbal Mohammadpur, Dhaka

An unusual snapshot Sir, Thank you for publishing the photograph of a police officer in riot-gear kneeling before the protestors to prevent them from proceeding to the prohibited zone (DS 26 April). This is really an unusual show of courtesy by a police officer whose department has gained notoriety for its inhumane attitudes towards the public. The said police officer has not only set a noble exam-

ple for his department, but has also raised the image of the present government to some extent. It's hoped all the police personnel will follow the suit which will surely prove rewarding to themselves in the long run. Your photographer, especially deserves bright tributes. Such nice photographs are rarely found in any paper of our country. The photographer has captured both the agony and the ecstasy in a single shot. He has added a new feather to his cap and a boon to readers' mind. I wish him bigger success in photo journalism. A photo like that of Pundit Nehru seen throwing a pillow at Dhebar Bhal at the annual session of AICC or a toddler straying on the dats close to JF Kennedy in UN General Assembly, is always revealing and a joy for ever. K R Zakhrni, Khulna

Newspaper library Sir, Over two dozens dailies, Bangla and English, are published from the metropolitan city of Dhaka. There are many people in the city who want to go through all the dailies at least once in a day to quench their thirst of various news and views, reports and comments and editorials etc. But this is not possible for a commonman because he cannot afford to purchase all the dailies nor there is a single public library in Dhaka where

in all the dailies are available. We would request the management of the newspapers to kindly open a newspaper library in Dhaka for the benefit of the members of the public. We feel that the National Press Club, Dhaka would be the most ideal place for the library. Members of the public who would be enlisted as library members by the management of the newspapers would pay monthly subscription, if necessary. O H Kabir Dhaka-1203.

Bhutto Sir, This refers to Mr M T Haq's letter "Benazir expected to be back to power" published on the 1st May, 1993. It does not interest us in the least whether she is back in power or not. Nor indeed does anything else about Pakistan. However, it shames and angers us to read paenics of praise about Bhutto, who was instrumental in allowing the Pakistani army's act of murder and destruction through the nine months following March, 1971. "A most colourful personality" he may have been but a power hungry "criminal one" as well. God help the Muslim world and the whole world if, as Mr Haq contends, the likes of Bhutto have to be their saviours. Farzana Khair and friends Dhanmandi R/A, Dhaka