

Consensus and the Probe Body

It is heartening, the way the treasury bench and the opposition resolved their differences and brought about a consensus decision on forming a 14-member special parliamentary committee to investigate the opposition allegation of corruption against the ministry of agriculture, irrigation, water development and flood control.

The way, the consensus on the probe body was arrived at, indicates the growing maturity of our political parties and the spirit of accommodation among them on both sides.

We would like to state that the impression of widespread corruption is real. It may not be the fault of this government per se, for it existed from much before.

This newspaper considers the formation of the parliamentary committee to be a very significant development. The statement of the deputy leader of the House Dr Badruddoza Chowdhury that "We would not like to do anything by the sheer strength of our majority" is in line with the true spirit of parliamentary democracy.

Meeting Challenges of Nature

A series of natural calamities in the form of earthquake and floods have struck this planet of ours from Japan to Greece to India to the US.

In case of the earthquake, the damage is massive and no other natural phenomenon causes as much destruction over so large an area in so short a time.

Neither the earthquake nor the floods can be contained by any scientific means. But a timely warning of the disaster can surely minimise the loss.

While the construction of big dams and underground explosion of nuclear devices have been responsible for much of the changes leading to floods and earthquakes, the knowledge why such calamities are making increasing visitations does not help.

AFTER a brief melodrama, the ruling party and the opposition in Parliament adopted unanimously a committee to probe into the alleged corruption charges against Irrigation, Water Development and Flood Control Minister Maj Gen (ret'd) M Majid-ul-Huq and his ministry.

The move to form a committee to investigate corruption charges against a minister was an unprecedented one in Bangladesh's brief parliamentary history.

Even after the formation of the committee last Tuesday a question kept buzzing in the minds of a large section of people: Why this 17-day drama by both the treasury and the opposition benches?

It is learnt from ruling party insiders (not ministers) that a group of leaders opposed the committee saying that even if a shred of all the allegations were to be proved, the image of the government would be tarnished.

would tantamount to acceptance of the allegations. Such an impression would be equally harmful for the government.

The sacking of state minister Nurul Huda was also discussed among the BNP law markers. The allegations against Majid-ul-Huq came in a stronger form after Huda was dropped from the cabinet.

It was also considered that the opposition would score a political point if the ruling party refused the idea of forming a committee.

On the other hand, the opposition, mainly the Awami League, took it as a challenge to prove that government ministers were "corrupt."

Opposition sources said that they would continue their campaign if they succeeded in proving corruption in the

Irrigation Ministry. They claimed that they had ample evidence regarding corruption in other ministries as well, and would demand similar committees for those ministries.

Political analysts feel, the opposition's strategy to paint the government as corrupt or dishonest is timed cleverly. The opposition realises that unless it can discredit the BNP in the eyes of the public as a corrupt and inefficient administration,

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

its own prospects at the polls two years hence would suffer.

Whatever may be the eventual outcome of the present probe, one thing is certain: the whole exercise of constituting this special investigation can only bolster the Jatiya Sangsad's role as an effective monitor of the executive wing.

Tofael's speech in the morning session on June 26 was the prelude to the 17-day historic sequence of the budget session of the Fifth Parliament.

The AL leader brought three specific charges against the Irrigation Minister: Misappropriation of Tk 600 crore out of Tk 900 crore sanctioned for maintenance work of the flood protection embank-

ment in Bhola; a favourable treatment of a particular firm in getting work of the Irrigation Ministry; and tender scams involving different projects in Magura and Bhola, the home constituencies of the minister and the AL leader respectively.

An apparently offended and aggrieved Majid-ul-Huq who was not in the House at the time, replied in the afternoon session that the allegations were 'untrue'. He demanded a

committee should probe the matter.

Conspicuously, the minister stormed out of the House immediately afterwards before Tofael had a chance to take the floor to accept the challenge of proving his charges.

The Speaker then sought opinion from the Deputy Leader of the House Prof Badruddoza Chowdhury who requested Chief Whip of the treasury bench Khandaker Delwar Hossain to say something on the issue. The Chief Whip said that since the minister and the opposition leader had both addressed the Speaker, it was the Speaker's discretion what decision to take.

The Speaker ended the day's

deliberation by saying that he would give a ruling the next day.

On the following day the Speaker announced in the House that a committee would be formed to investigate into the allegations against the Irrigation Ministry as well as the minister. The terms of reference of the committee would be decided later, he added.

Both treasury bench and opposition members welcomed the decision with cheers and table thumping.

The Speaker also announced that the terms of reference would be finalised later on in consultation with the treasury bench and opposition stalwarts. He worked on the matter until July 7 to announce the name of the committee members with a term of reference.

But the problem arose when the Speaker suggested that the committee would only investigate the alleged misappropriation of Tk 600 crore and related matters.

However, the opposition demanded that other allegations should also be looked into by the committee. But the Speaker, as well as the ruling party members, disagreed with the opposition claim, saying that such a committee could work only on specific issues, not on the whole affairs of the ministry.

The opposition staged a walkout from the House protesting the Speaker's decision to limit the scope of inves-

tigation. Seeing that the two groups failed to reach a consensus on the terms of reference, and feeling that such a committee ought to be adopted unanimously according to the rules, the Chair announced that the proposed committee had died a natural death.

Some more serious allegations came from the opposition which questioned the neutrality of the Speaker and also alleged that a distorted version of Speaker's ruling was presented in the House.

Such allegations hurt Shaikh Razzak Ali who, on July 8, however, reopened the committee chapter after the opposition returned to the House, but declined to head the committee.

The committee, however, finally came into being on Tuesday after several days of discussion in the House and negotiations outside. It was also decided that the terms of reference would be finalised on the basis of the speeches of Tofael Ahmed and Majid-ul-Huq on June 26.

Be that as it may, the people can only wait with eagerness for the eventual report of the committee.

The opinions expressed by Kabir U Ahmed in his article 'Is 'Share Economy' a New Concept toward Economic Emancipation?' published in this page yesterday are his own and not of USAID or World Bank. — Editor

P AUL MUTE is a Member of Parliament and the first vice-chairman of one of Kenya's three major opposition parties, Ford-Kenya.

A lead headline in the mass circulation Daily Nation reads: "Ignore Moi school fund — Mute." A year or so ago such a headline in Kenya would have been unthinkable.

Since the first real multiparty election in three decades on December 29, it has become the norm to oppose anything suggested by the ruling Kenya Africa National Union (KANU) party or the Moi government.

Kenya became a de facto one-party state soon after independence from Britain in 1963. About four years ago parliament rushed a bill making it a de jure one-party state.

While the fall of communism is endlessly bandied about, its primary consequence goes unnoticed: namely, that anti-communism is no longer viable as the extremist reactionary creed.

Like the plagues that ravaged Europe during the Middle Ages, today's racial prejudices have taken hold of the civilised world.

Appearing one day in Germany, the next in Spain, the next in North America, and continuously among the new nations which have emerged since the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, racism is the sign of our age.

In recent years, there has been a lot talk of human rights. Today there is no constitution that does not consecrate them.

West Germany was a shining example of a nation that in the theory guaranteed equality to all of its inhabitants, and as far as humanitarian rhetoric is concerned, no one could compete with Germany's zeal for human dignity.

Today's neo-Nazism, successor to the Hitlerite tradition, is fuelled more by racial prejudices than by other elements of the Nazi agenda, which presently have minimal drawing

Kenya's Feel Let Down by their Opposition

Robert Okinyiotani writes from Mombasa

Seven months after the controversial multiparty election in Kenya, opposition politicians are still playing little constructive role in improving the country's serious economic situation.



OGINGA ODINGA - At 81, stunned the country

with double-digit inflation and high unemployment.

Corruption was almost institutionalised and mismanagement of the economy meant the meagre resources were going into the pockets of the few — President Moi's cronies with or without his knowledge and blessing.

Agriculture had been so neglected Kenya had become an importer instead of an exporter of food. It had come to rely mainly on tourism for foreign exchange — and in that sector demand was elastic.

So far the people have been sorely disappointed. The split in one of the two main opposition parties — the Forum for

Restoration of Democracy (FORD), led by former vice-president Oginga Odinga, put paid to any chance of KANU being beaten in the general election.

KANU came back to power with 100 of the 188 seats. The two FORDs won 31 seats apiece and the Democratic Party (DP) came fourth. And what most disappointed Kenyans was that the opposition parties were reduced to tribal clubs — FORD-Kenya, of the Luo, the second largest tribe after the Kikuyu, and FORD-Asili and DP, of the Kikuyu. The lesser parties have become moribund.

Since the election, the opposition parties have lived up to their name. Opposing everything Moi does. They have become obsessed with him. They

boycotted the opening of Parliament — a non-party event — and then afterwards turned the first two sessions into high school debating periods.

The name-calling, insults and near-physical confrontation have denied Kenyans meaningful debate. Opposition leaders have not realised that getting Moi out of State House alone will not yank the country out of its economic morass.

They have not helped to tackle the immediate problems — 40 per cent inflation, finding jobs for the 17 of every 100 Kenyans out of work, and looking for food to forestall an imminent famine.

Kenneth Matiba, one-time cabinet minister and leader of FORD-Asili, said: "From now on I will boycott parliamentary sit-

tings because they are useless. I will not attend even the one-week debate on the budget." He was reacting to the presentation of the 1993-94 budget by Finance Minister Musalia Mudavadi.

Only one opposition leader, 81-year-old Odinga, seems to be discovering his proper role. While Matiba and Mwai Kibaki, leader of the DP, have vowed never to work with Moi, Odinga has said: "I will work with President Moi to bring about the changes this country needs. For the good of all Kenyans, particularly my people (the Luo) there is every need to cooperate with the government."

Odinga stunned the country when he attended the President's garden party after a national day and invited Moi to his Bondo constituency to see for himself the despicable state of the infrastructure.

If Matiba and Kibaki follow suit then Kenyans can hope for a more meaningful opposition — though not just yet.

ROBERT OKINYIOTANI is on the staff of Kenya's Daily Mail in Mombasa.

The Plague of Racism

Former Colombian president Alfonso Lopez Michelsen observes that racism has taken the place of anti-communism as the extremist reactionary creed.

ers who are willing to work for less.

This is case of the Algerians and Moroccans in France and people from India, Pakistan, and the Caribbean living in the United Kingdom.

In the new Germany the death toll from racial conflicts climbs higher daily, while the conflict between certain neighbouring states in the ex-Soviet Union shows many of the signs of a civil war.

It was known, at least in academic circles, that the presence of Spanish, Greek and Turkish workers in northern European countries would have a dramatic effect on the population balance.

In addition, the difference in the rate of reproduction between the Third World and northern races was gradually transforming the Turks, Arabs and even the Spanish into a political force.

By the year 2000, it was predicted, Europe would witness the appearance of a political constituency different from

those which had previously made up the demographic nucleus of the countries of the European Community. This prediction was kept rather quiet.

The conflict predicted manifested itself economically and socially long before it could be measured in political terms, and it is this situation that now confronts us. To the Third World, the sight of a discriminatory mentality building with such force is especially troubling.

North America is in a certain respect resistant to the disease of racism. The last 25 years have seen remarkable progress concerning the position of African, Americans in the United States.

And yet, racial epithets, such as dago (dirty foreigner), long relegated to dictionaries, are coming back into use again, though not in reference to the colour of one's skin but through association of certain activities with certain nationalities: Italians with the mafia,

Colombians with drug trafficking, Puerto Ricans with laziness, Haitians with begging.

In the 1980s, people routinely fled tyrannical governments to find a roof and a job in the United States. No one would have thought of detaining the huge number of Irish and Scandinavians who moved to the US in search of work.

But today, US President Bill Clinton, despite election promises, feels compelled to deploy ships and airplanes to interdict boatloads of Haitians fleeing to Florida.

Racial prejudice is so strong that black Americans are as ir-

rated as white Americans by the influx of Haitians. This is irrational racism in all its glory. If you add to this the general belief that AIDS comes from Africa you have an idea of the conflicts which will fill the coming years.

Already a third of West Germans believe Nazism had its good side and wasn't as abominable as they were taught in the first years of the German Federal Republic. Is this what the future holds? — IPS

Alfonso Lopez Michelsen is now the leader of Colombia's ruling Liberal Party.

To the Editor...

Administrative reform

Sir, It is very unfortunate that whether we have a BAKSAL government, military rule, bureaucracy, autocracy or democracy, widespread irregularities and corruption are alleged in our administration and the sufferings of the people know no bound.

We understand that our present democratic government is actively considering ways and means to bring about an administrative reform in the country to streamline the various functions and duties of the government, simplify the system and procedure of works and improve the standard of services and efficiency in various government offices and public sector corporations.

We cannot forget how under the autocratic regime of H M Ershad a handful of bureaucrats, chairmen and managing

directors in the name of efficiency and profit of the public sector corporations formed the so-called CONCOPE (Consultant Committee of Public Sector Enterprises), accumulated more and more powers in their hands and plundered the public enterprises.

An administrative reform on the basis of report, suggestions and recommendation of the bureaucrats may not be constructive, helpful and useful for us.

We, therefore, strongly feel that a National Administrative Reform Committee with MPs, senior government servants (both retired and in-service) and members of the public may be formed to accomplish the task. Members of the public because they are directly involved with the works and functions of the government and they are beset with multiple problems and difficulties in the practical field.

The National Administrative Committee may invite opinion from the members of the public through a printed questionnaire (both in Bangla and English) on

the following points:

- i) Functions and duties, administrative and financial powers of the ministers.
ii) Job description, administrative and financial powers of the secretaries.
iii) Job description, administrative and financial powers of all class I and class II officers.
iv) Rules and regulations for appointment and promotion of class I and class II officers, class III and class IV employees.
v) Rules and regulations for posting and transfer of all class I and class II officers and class III and class IV employees.
vi) Rules and regulations for dismissal, termination, suspension and submission of representation, appeal thereof for all class I and class II officers, class III and class IV employees.
vii) System and procedure of attending complaints from the members of the public.
The National Committee may scrutinise and summarise the public opinion and submit its recommendations to the Prime Minister for necessary action.

We strongly feel that a solid and concrete work on the administrative reform is imperative in the greater interest of the public service and also for the sake of success of democracy in our country.

O H Kabir Dhaka

Embarrassing or 'deserving of appreciation'?

Sir, Our Foreign Ministry officials deserve 'appreciation' for demonstrating their patriotism. They made the mistake of despatching the message of felicitation to a dead Prime Minister of France on the occasion of French National Day because they are so busy serving our country. Our Foreign Ministry officials do not bother who the hell is the Prime Minister of another country as they are devotedly concerned with Bangladesh only! Bravo! Shaheed Uttara, Dhaka

OPINION

Should Dhaka and Delhi Avoid Trade War on Jute?

A Clarification by S. B. Chaudhuri

I enjoyed the sarcasm in Abu Shakil's article published in this newspaper (opinion) on July 11 under the caption "Should Bangladesh and India Avoid Trade War in Jute Goods?"

Mr Shakil seems to sidestep the issues I had posed in my column of June 21. It's not a question of rationalising trade war. May be the term 'price war' suits the present context better.

The issues that I had raised are: Should a price war (if I may use these words in this piece) be waged with the taxpayers money, where will it lead us to and, if it comes to that, can the imperatives of maintaining external competitiveness justify such a move? Then again, is it not inconsistent with our macro economic policy stance?

What is wrong in seeking a viable alternative to a costly and self-defeating price war? As I said earlier, this can only impoverish the 'warriors' and reward the buyer with a windfall. In effect, it would subsidise foreign buyers' purchases at the cost of taxpayers in this country. Mr Shakil has summarily rejected the idea of an orderly marketing arrangement with India as untenable on the ground of jute goods being a 'weak product'. Given the growing global environmental awareness and the diversity of the products that can be fashioned out of jute, the fibre need not remain a 'weak product' for all time to come. Taking into account the dominant share of the world market, one should, perhaps, plan a little ahead. Why should we shut our eyes

on possibilities altogether? Incidentally, earlier I had missed out on the possible implications of a long price war for the jute grower. A price war induced continuous slide in export prices of jute goods will, in all likelihood, depress internal prices, punishing the grower too.

As for external prices, I had quoted rates for the three main jute products only to make the picture complete. However, I am undone here as Mr Shakil has brushed aside FAO prices as 'official prices' — whatever that may mean! How else can one compare international prices? It is a different matter if one has access to information on sale prices of a particular firm or organization. However, selected prices, on isolated deals, will serve to illustrate a fragmented short-term situation. As for exchange rate differential, if you take January '91 level as the base for comparison, then you would also have to take the extent to which the Indian currency was overvalued at that time, into account. However, in my write-up, I did not argue for currency overvaluation — that is a different issue altogether. I only outlined the prevailing situation. Besides, external competitiveness should be adjudged in its totality. I spoke of fall in India's exports in 1992-93 (the latest year) whereas Mr Shakil talks about 1991-92. Although we may differ, I do appreciate Mr Shakil's concerns and admire his alertness. Well, each of us to his own views then.