

Good Day One

It had all the undesirable potential of being recorded as a rather unsavoury start, yet the first day of the winter session of the seventh Jatiya Sangsad was allowed to pass without any burst-up or deviation that could have dampened the spirit.

Kudos to both the members of the Treasury and the Opposition for using their good sense to uphold the democratic spirit.

The second session of the new parliament promised to generate considerable heat at its commencement. What really alarmed the more concerned watchers of democracy was the pattern set by the political rivals in the earlier session of the House. Unscrupulous, unnecessary utterances and gestures literally took the gilt off the gingerbread. People became wary of and confused about the objective and ability of their representatives in the Parliament.

Besides, with the passage of time, the pursuance of its policy by the party in power, for the better or for the worse, left the opposition with a few more arrows in its quiver. All in all, confrontation seemed in the air and exchange of salvos was expected across the floor from Day One.

Instead, a tacit understanding, almost an undercurrent of cooperation to allow the parliamentary process to progress at a natural pace was noted. The issue of disclosing the names of two alleged anti-liberation members in Sheikh Hasina's council of ministers at one stage of deliberations on the condolence motion was dropped to save the government any possible embarrassment. The Opposition deserves to be congratulated for pulling the horns in, apparently for no great benefit of their own.

Almost all the parties in this part of the world have a history of being notoriously oblivious of those rules of procedure that do not quite serve the purpose of either glorifying themselves or vilifying their rivals in the parliament. In other words, we are more familiar with the habit of preferring convenience to neutrality while alluding to or observing the parliamentary rules. The good offices of the Minister for Commerce and Industries to take the sting out of opposition's aggression were a healthy parliamentary gesture.

Morning is often said to be an early indicator of the day to emerge. From that point of view, the first day of the winter session of the seventh parliament promises well for the coming days but it will take some doing on both sides to make that happen.

Security is no Child-play

One wonders what could be the buzz-word for the personal staff of any top political dignitary now. Is it "do as you please" because you are entitled to a self-arrogated immunity to rules, even as inviolate as that of the parliament by virtue of being attached to a high and important one?

The question has come to the fore, this time only more bafflingly than before, as on the inaugural day of the second session of parliament, the PS to the Leader of the Opposition tried to bull-doze his way through the security and did actually carry a revolver inside the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban in open defiance of standard rules forbidding this.

On being stopped at the VIP gate by the security personnel following electronic detection of a fire arm in his handbag the PS despite being a government official had the temerity it seems, not only to refuse handing it over but also to carry it upstairs and then send it to the security people via somebody else. The offence looks culpable on three grounds: (a) even licenced gun-holders have to deposit their fire-arms before entering the Parliament which he had not done; (b) he had failed to show the licence on demand; and (c) even his belated deposit of the weapon with the securitymen was made not by him in person but by someone else which itself was an offence: a fire-arm owned or claimed to be owned by somebody cannot be in possession of a third person.

All of these constitute a serious breach of the parliament's sanctity, aside from the familiar acid taste it leaves ironically of an over-wrought security concern at a place where safety is best ensured by compliance with rules.

In a reactive pretext to the indefensible act it has been claimed that 'others' also carried fire-arms inside the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban. A probe into the incident needs to be followed up, in a basically integrated fashion, by a wider investigation aimed at finding out how long this has been going on, if all, or where are the fault-lines in the security system. If there is a feeling on the opposition side that the security arrangement is not adequate for its leader, then, by all means it should be beefed up but let's have no more of this highly condemnable incident.

Jayewardene Remembered

Sir Lanka has lost an elderly statesman in the passing away of Junius Jayewardene. And our loss is that of a regional friend and philosopher who had brought a pioneering vision to the SAARC as it took shape in the mid-eighties.

A product of Sri Lanka's political and intellectual encounter with colonialism, he not only came unstuck from prejudices against the West but also went the extra-mile in embracing economic liberalism. During his two-term presidency between 1978 and 1989 he ushered his country from its socialist moorings into an era of free market economy raring to forge a global connection.

It is a measure of the high political stature and appeal he enjoyed among his compatriots that the United National Party (UNP) which he had led was in power for 17 long years.

And on the flip-side, it is for the most part of that long stretch of time that the ethnic divide in Sri Lanka exacerbated. He signed the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord which failed to quell the conflict owing to its insensitivity towards the Tamilian sentiments.

We share the sorrow of the friendly Sri Lankan nation at Jayewardene's demise and express our deepest condolences to his bereaved family.

Costs of Time Mismanagement and Public Interest

How much time is wasted in the government sector can be checked by paying a random visit to any government office or public sector establishment like nationalised commercial banks, or research institutes or universities or public sector corporations etc.

here, which will be discussed below.

However, to follow the paradigm of habit formation, it can be said that once something becomes a habit, or a bad habit, of any kind with any individual, it is difficult for him to get out of it. But if the bad habit is with those who are supposed to take care of the national interest, then one must understand that something basic must have gone wrong somewhere for which some corrective measures become mandatory to protect the national interest. More on this is discussed below. Before one gets down to these issues, one should first try to give some estimates of financial losses to the government due to such habits of under-supply or mismanagement of time in the government establishments.

Some Estimates of Financial Losses

It is not possible to do a thorough social benefit-cost analysis here of the mismanagement of office time in Bangladesh. It needs a careful collection and analysis of the relevant sets of data. However, some rough estimates will be presented to give a flavour of the quantitative magnitudes of losses involved. The arithmetic will, nonetheless, serve as an eye-opener.

Start with the number of official holidays first. The total number of annual holidays given in the official list is 19. Since 15th August is declared as a national holiday this year, the total number of official holidays per year will be 20 from this year onwards. But since no-one returns from home after the two 3-day Eid holidays before the end of the whole week, the real number of holidays that people do take unofficially will come to about 28-30 days a year or at least 4 full weeks. That means, government offices are open for only 48 weeks a year. Next, to err on the safe side, assume that the officers and employees work at least one hour less per day of the week. (Very few people come to office before 9 am while they are expected to come at 8 am).

Then the effective weekly work hours come to only 33 instead of 39 that is officially scheduled. The total number of work hours lost in 48 weeks come to 288. Add to this, the minimum of 7 extended holidays (or 45.5 hours) taken by all officers and employees, as mentioned above. This brings the total number of hours under-supplied to 333.5 a year, which comes to 8.6 weeks or about 2 months. Getting 8.6 weeks or about two months salary a year without any work is, by all criteria, a hefty bonus especially in a country like Bangladesh. There are very few countries in the world, rich or poor, where state officials and

cial loss to the government due to the under-supply or mismanagement of time in the government offices.

The above estimate is not all. What about the losses to the nation due to delays in file processing and decision-making on various projects and their productivity effects on the economy? The recent complaints made by the Japanese delegation about delays in taking decisions on government projects can be partly attributed to such mismanagement of time in government offices. However, what about the demurrages paid by the business people for non-clearance of imports from the customs during

tor. Although this decision had satisfied one special interest group, but it has not been the most optimal solution for the country. The national losses due to this decision seem to far outweigh the gains of that group of employees.

In a broader sense, the whole nation has been made a hostage in their hands. A far better solution would have been to give these fourth class employees a salary raise of 25 per cent-30 per cent which would have cost not more than perhaps Tk 20-Tk 30 crores per year, and yet the government would have saved (in terms of the narrow financial cost discussed above), at least another Tk 35-Tk 25 crores in the budget. Even if the salary raise cost about Tk 30 crores a year, it would still be better to enforce an office time schedule of 9am-4.30pm with half-an-hour for prayer and lunch break for 6 days a week.

Public Interest

However, one should not treat the problem of time mismanagement as only a problem of financial losses to the government or the nation. It is not a zero-sum game according to which what is lost to one party is gained by the other party. The consequences of time mismanagement in government offices has wider dimension than only the financial losses to the government. First of all, it amounts to a violation of justice to the tax-payers of the country. Why should the tax-payers hard-earned money be paid for the absenteeism in office? Tax-payers are supposed to get adequate services from the government officials. Delays in delivering any service or any decision from the government officials affecting their life can mean denial of justice to them.

However, the second and the most important point is that these officers and employees are paid to serve and protect only the public interest during their entire tenure in office. There is no room for self-seeking or personal aggrandisement in any form while in office. In any situation of conflict of public

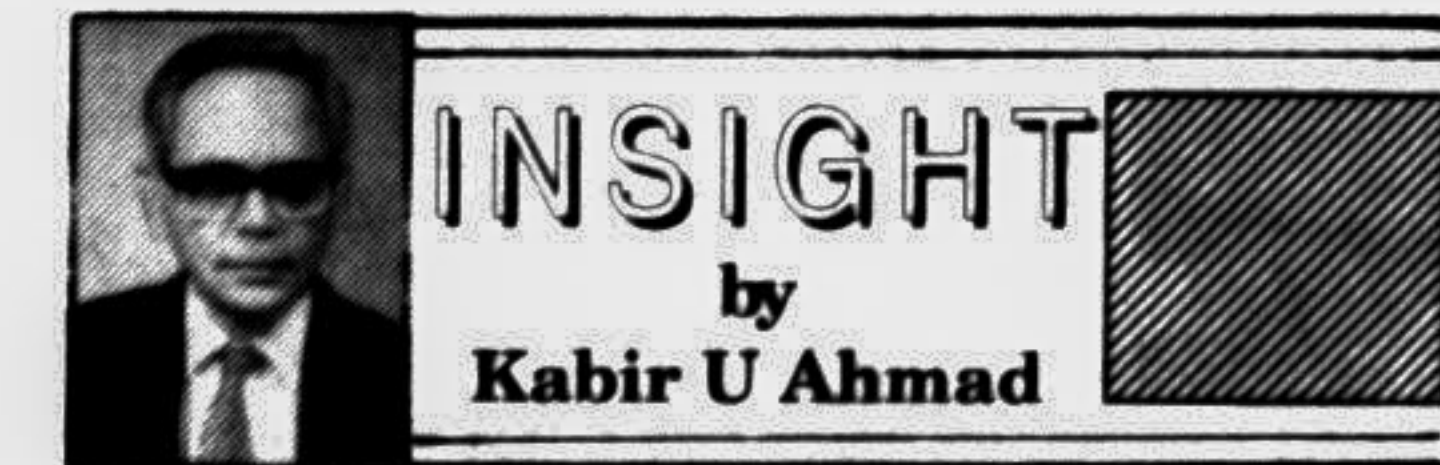
and private interest, it is the latter that should get the priority. Therefore, they cannot take advantage of any moment of their time in public office to promote their personal interests. To do so would amount to violations of their terms of job contract and the oath they have taken. That means, any act of self-seeking while holding public office is both illegal and immoral.

What Can Be Done?

At the cost of one being branded as impractical and outdated at a time when the moral foundations of the society has been destroyed, one has to fall back on the classical solution of giving priority to the protection of public interest as opposed to private interest as long as officials and employees hold public positions paid by ordinary tax-payers. The code of conduct as well as the punishment for violation of such conduct are given in the service rules and in the constitution of the country. Any deviations from this code is illegal and immoral. What is needed is the proper enforcement of the code of behaviour and discipline at all levels of the administration which is lacking now. Everyone should be reminded that an administration which is feeble, weak and slack cannot energise people to work hard to achieve faster growth of the economy which is what the country needs now.

One would like to give to the new government is that the government administration is now over-stuffed and it should be made lean and efficient by drastically cutting unnecessary manpower. It can effectively use the amount of Tk 100 crore kept in the budget for golden handshake to achieve this objective. The new government with popular mandate in its initial stage can effectively implement it and make the administration lean, but in its later years when it will have to grapple with too many problems, it will not have the drive and energy to launch such a programme. It will be too late then.

To conclude, let everyone be reminded of the old classical saying that no strong and efficient body politic can be built on weak and corrupt administrative foundations.



INSIGHT
by
Kabir U Ahmad

employees get such a bonus every year.

However, if one looks at it from the point of view of total man-hour lost with about 1.1 million government officers and employees on the pay roll now, it comes to 2.2 million man-months per year. To translate this figure into monetary value, assume that the average salary in government offices is only Tk 2,500 (or \$625) per person per month including all allowances, provided funds/pension contributions etc. Since the salary range goes from Tk 1,000 for the lowest level of employees to Tk 10,000 for the top level secretaries per month with larger number of employees at the lower levels, the average salary is likely to be higher. But in the absence of actual data, it is safer to pick a smaller number. Thus, the total amount of losses to the government comes to a staggering figure of Tk 55 crore or \$12.5 million per year (at the current market exchange rate of Tk 43/\$1). This is the rockbottom estimate of the annual financial

these two months? Further, what about the costs of delays in meeting the export L/Cs? Many other similar questions come to mind all of which relate to direct and indirect losses to the economy and the society due to mismanagement of time in government offices. All these need to be investigated carefully before one can arrive at the overall estimates of social losses due to the under-supply of time in government offices.

But who gains? Every one can see that the officers and employees derive double benefits from such under-supply of their time and effort. They get their salaries for these two months without putting in any time, and what is more, some of them use this time, in one way or another, in the private market to earn extra money. Reports have it that it was the former President Lt. General Ershad who fixed office time from 8 am to 2.30 pm to satisfy the demand of the fourth-class employees so that they could do a second job in the private sector.

It's No Monkey Business

A Peep into One of the Vital Aspects of the Psyche of the American Voters When They Choose Their President
by M Tajul Islam

and you are a PR man. I would love to have your immediate reaction as a neutral observer. "Okay. But how do you expect me to remain neutral since Mr Hart happens to be the friend of my friend?" I said jokingly.

It was the time when President Reagan completed more than half the tenure of his second term. The Republicans normally are known to be more proficient in global rather than the domestic affairs. For years the people sent Republicans to the White House and the Democrats to the Capitol Hill (Congress and Senate). By sheer personality, charisma, direct communication with the people through TV, making full use of his acting abilities, President Reagan had made a big dent in the minds of his people. He was the first American President who ran his country through television. A columnist commented that actor Reagan's best acting was in the White House as the President of the United States. Since there was no scope for a third term for him and after years of Republican rule, the Americans were looking for a change. But their yardstick to measure the next President was still Reagan.

In this backdrop Senator Gary Hart announced his candidature for party nomination of presidency at a small gathering which was broadcast live by the main TV channels. His wife was beside him. As promised, I called Paul the next morning. I said, "He has vision, a sense of direction, adept in both foreign and domestic affairs, radiates personality and charm. And he is tall and handsome, the factors which do have an impact in American elections. If played well, he will be able to strike a

chord with the American public. It's certainly a good start. Well, that's my first impression and congratulations." Thanks. And we have a long way to go," he said.

Gary Hart's campaign continued and his rating was going higher. Within a few days, suddenly, a story came out in the media on his private life. It was involving women. The same day he forcefully denied the allegations. "What is it Paul?" I called Boston and asked him. "You know as much as I do," he said. In a few days another story came with more details. Gary Hart challenged the media and asked them, "Why don't you follow my every step?" He couldn't imagine that the press would follow his advice. Same week he committed another blunder. At the weekend he spent a day with one of his friends in a friend's house in Washington when nobody was in. A newspaper published in detail at what time he came followed by the girl and at what time the girl left followed by him after some time. The bomb shells started hitting him one after another. I called my good friend again saying, "Paul, you know how the two 'boys' in the Washington Post forced Nixon out of the White House. I feel Mr Hart should have avoided throwing the challenge to the media." Well, he sighed, "I am involved in the political strategy and not the media. Maybe you are right."

Gary Hart called a press conference denying everything and continued with his campaign in one state after another. The political analysts measured him with his party contestants who were called "political dwarfs". He was emerging as the only person standing between the Republican candidate (later Bush) and the White House. Rest of the Democratic aspirants were fast falling back into mere postscripts. If he could handle the situation carefully and coolly, he was sure to enter the Oval Office on the 20th of January, 1989.

Then, all of a sudden came the final blast. "The National Enquirer", a popular Miami weekly of Florida, one not so fine morning for Hart, came out with a picture of him in swimming costume with a model Dona Rice (also in scanty swimming costume) on a pleasure boat. That was not enough. The girl was sitting on the lap of the next probable President of the United States! And that was the end of the Gary Hart, his ascent to the White House, and his political career. Ironically, the boat's name was the "Monkey Business".

This time Paul called. After a brief analysis and regrets I asked him, "who is the next likely choice of the party?" "Governor Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts," he said. "Are you going to work for him too?" "Nope," he said, "no more this time."

This is not the end of the story. Months later, among hundreds of calls that I received one raised my eyebrows when the receptionist said that the Editor of the same Miami weekly wanted to talk to me. The very name of the journal which put the last nail in Gary Hart's coffin caused a chill down my spine. What happened? Why Bangladesh Embassy? I thought, I cleared my throat and with normal warmth said, "Hi, how are you doing?" He said, "Mr Islam, we have definite information that women and children from Bangladesh are being smuggled out of the border to India and beyond. Most of the women are sold into prostitution in different countries and the children are allegedly being used for transplantation of organs." The human smuggling was not unknown since news with pictures were published in Dhaka papers a number of times. I thought, So without any hesitation I said, "I confirm the first part of your question. Some of the women are engaged as domestic aids in the neighbouring countries and the Middle East and the rest are sold for immoral trafficking. But I cannot confirm right away why the children are smuggled out. I have to refer it to Bangladesh for details." I said I would call him within ten days. He was very generous in thanking me for not trying to avoid the questions and for giving straight answer as far as I knew. I sent a telex to Dhaka giving the details (there was no fax in the embassy at that time). There was no response. After five days I sent a reminder. No response. On the ninth day I sent the final telex saying, "Tomorrow when I am contacted I will be constrained to tell the journal that the head office did not respond. I am sure they are going to quote me word for

word". Quick came the reply the next day, "we checked with the Ministry concerned but there is no information as to why the children are being smuggled out and for what purpose." I called the Editor and told him about the message received from Dhaka. He was disappointed but pleased that I kept my word. He said they had also earlier contacted the American Embassy in Dhaka but they also could not give any definite clue. Otherwise he had plans to send a correspondent to Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Middle East and Europe for an investigative story on these inhuman activities. Thanking me profusely, he invited me to visit him if I ever go to the south.

A few months later, at the invitation of the Bangladeshi community in South Florida to give a talk on Bangladesh, I went there for two days. I called the Editor. With the typical warmth of an American he said "Ahl what a pleasant surprise! So you are in town? It's good that you called today. My wife and I are going to the Bahamas the day after tomorrow. Why don't you drop in to our house tomorrow evening." It was more than I expected. Normally in the western society one is entertained in restaurants. Only close and family friends are invited at home. Next day I went to his beautiful house with a patch of a garden in front, a creek of the Atlantic ocean behind and his personal luxury boat tied to a pillar, ready for the next day's journey. He introduced me to his wife and two of his colleagues — also Editors of other departments of the journal.

Our conversation ranged from Bangladesh, our natural resources and disasters, success in garments and South Asia. US politics, "Miami Vice", jokes and humour with lots of food, drinks and laughter. All the time I was thinking that these were the people who caused political doom of the "most probable" successor to President Reagan. I couldn't resist my curiosity. I brought up the story of Gary Hart saying, "it must have taken a lot of guts to decide to print the Dona Rice picture." "Certainly," he said, "We had to be very careful and absolutely sure that it was not fake. And the grave consequences that we would have faced if we were proved wrong and what he would face if we were right." I asked, "who ultimately gave the vital green signal and blew the whistle to go ahead and print the photograph?" With a naughty smile and a wink he said, "you are sitting in his house!" I stared at him for sometime and said, "For months I have been trying but not getting a clear answer to a puzzle. A leader of a country is the product of his society. For example, apart from a few atheists, you Americans are religious but not orthodox in your beliefs. You seem to be happy as long as your President believes in God and goes to Sunday Mass, a very good manager with political vision, commitment, good programme and radiates confidence. Yours is a more or less free and liberal society. Now, Mister Editor, you drink,

have good time and (glancing at the kitchen) must be having some fun with girls once in a while." He smiled and said, "Well, you can say that." So what is wrong if your next door neighbour, who is brought up in the same social environment, values, habits and weaknesses that are accepted in the society, enters into politics and ultimately aspires for the White House?" He said, "Very good question. Now let me ask you a question. Say, you are a good worker in office. You drink heavily, chain smoker, and say, have occasional fun with women. OK?" I said, "OK!" So you think there is nothing wrong in all that? "Omni may be not." Now tell me, would you like your father to be the same?" I gasped for breath and said, "Oh God, no. Never." All three started laughing and I joined them. He said, "Mr Islam, the man we send to the White House is not only the top most manager of the country, he is a leader of the country who is a symbol of courage with clear vision, sense of direction, symbol of authority, generates confidence and, above all, has high morals on whom we can rely and sleep peacefully at night being reassured that our country is in good hands. One slip about the last outweighs all other qualities. This applies to all elected office bearers like congressmen, senators, mayors, governors. If one loophole is found through the keyhole, he is finished forever. We don't bother much about the personal lives of public servants or corporate chiefs but it is different with those who claim to be public leaders. "What about Reagan?" I asked. "He divorced his wife and married Nancy." "Precisely," He proved his honesty. "Remember Watergate? Our people can never accept and trust a leader who tells lies." I said jokingly, "I got it. In our part of the world militant social workers used to champion the cause of widow marriages except for their own widowed mothers!"

In that beautiful cool summer evening, on the shore of the Atlantic, I got the answer to the puzzle. The next greatest political showbiz on earth, the US presidential election, will be held, as usual, on the first Tuesday of November 1996. The race is on. To carefully select the next tenant for the White House, who should be as pure as the morning dew, the voters and the media are closely watching the players from their homes, hotels and motels, many of them with their Dona Rices on their laps.

I also recall what the Editor friend had said, "Mr Islam, if you judge America by New York, Los Angeles, Miami, Chicago or San Francisco you will be wrong. Basically America is a conservative country. Choosing a President, the leader of the country is a very serious matter. Our people are very careful about sending their chosen tenant for four years to 1600, Pennsylvania Avenue. And remember, the name of that building is 'The White House' and not 'The Monkey Business'."

The writer is a former press minister at Bangladesh Embassy in Washington DC.

To the Editor...

Concerned questions

Sir, My assessment of the Prime Minister's performance in the auditorium of BTV is that it turned out to be useless.

My first question is on terrorism. I have consulted Chambers' Dictionary wherein the meaning of "terrorism" is "an organised system of intimidation". We have a government of consensus who could overthrow the previously elected government as they differed politically on question of free and fair election. Now that the AL with its like-minded parties is in power, how then terrorism could exist with the help and cooperation of weaker organisations? Any attempt to suppress and destroy democratic political party in the name of elimination of terrorism would turn into terrorism in a larger scale. Would the Prime Minister advise circle concerned to look at the affair from this angle?

My next question is on the "consensus". In spite of establishing a government of consensus, mammoth systems views in P.D. Desai, Wassa and Titas and other public utility organisations continue. Losses in nationalised sector are as usual. Neither the process of eliminating terrorism, nor administration of "consensus"

is coming to any help for checking the plundering of national wealth. How, then, the people would be benefited by these two big steps?

Would it not be difficult to digest that inefficient personnel are being engaged to combat terrorism and government of consensus is weaker than plunderers of national wealth even in government-controlled departments?

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Release of government-held shares to the market

Sir, On the 1st of October, in the "Sabinoj Jignasha" programme, telecast live on the BTV, when a councillor of the Dhaka Stock Exchange, after explaining the background entailing the urgency of releasing of government-held shares of different organisations, asked the Prime Minister to know specifically the government's view in the respect, the Prime Minister was found a bit to be in embarrassment and she replied that she did not understand much about business matters.

Nevertheless, I would request

the Prime Minister to take up the matter with the Finance Ministry and the SEC urgently. In fact the government should right now unload all its shares of the different organisations to ease the present turgid situation in the stock markets of the country.

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"Expedite Police Reform"

Sir, Thanks for your editorial on 12th October, '96. After Yasmeen case of Dinajpur and Seema case of Rajshahi, can we trust and do we need this police force? If the 'Bera' or 'the protective wall' itself eats away the 'khet' or 'the land', why then we keep such a force devoid of basic qualities, the normal obligation and social commitments? Let us get rid of this police force and save millions of taka. Let every locality have their own volunteer force to deal with social evils/criminals of their area. I hope the people's government will look into this seriously.

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