

## JS Sans Committees

The electorate remains a mute but internally seething spectator to the trading of contradictory positions going on between the ruling and opposition party legislators over the formation of parliamentary standing committees. Nine long months of the JS' tenure have gone by without the bastion of the Parliament's effectiveness being provided through the induction of a committee system. Its conspicuous absence has rendered the JS into a virtually infructuous representative democratic institution in terms of substantive law-making based on bipartisan inputs, endorsements, guaranteed applicability and joint accountability to the electorate.

The utility of a committee system is to be perceived beyond the pale of a traditional or copybook requirement in our peculiar context where it has the added potential to take the heat off political agitations in the street and put us on a road to constructive engagement within the four walls of the JS. Both legislation and governance can be so much the easier and effectual for it.

When such is the intrinsic worth of parliamentary committees it is incredible how the formation of these vital bodies has been allowed to be stalled over a principle versus technicality warfare.

In a latest statement the Prime Minister has maintained that the JS committees would be formed in accordance with the Rules of Procedure and the precedent set by the BNP in the fifth parliament. Technically, of course, the ruling party cannot be faulted for this posture but it is the spirit that must, in all fairness to its earlier affirmation by the PM, be the preponderant consideration now.

It was Sheikh Hasina's committed stance on making the parliament effective by dispensing with the earlier practice of having ministers as chairmen of the JS committees that earned her so much public acclaim and raised aspirations all around for a new-look, vibrant Jatiya Sangsads.

What, however, is quite baffling, is the ruling party's going back on an agreement reached in the Committee on JS Rules of procedure which was presided over by the Speaker. AL had agreed to proportionate seats in committees, on BNP's withdrawal of its demand that chairmanship of committees would also be proportional.

We think AL is being penny-wise and pound-foolish. Working of the JS Committees would lend far greater credibility and respect, not to mention clarity and accountability to the AL's governance process. We urge the leader of the House to change her party's course of action.

## Soil Fertility Losses

An international study on the impact of environmental degradation on soil fertility in South Asian countries has confirmed what was feared-- a drastic fall in the production capacity of arable land. The loss of fertility for the region has been estimated at half of the total arable land but for Bangladesh the figure is as high as 75 per cent. What is most alarming is the fact that instead of lessening their dependence on chemical fertiliser, farmers in Bangladesh are using ever greater quantity of this to maintain — albeit without success — yield levels. Crop yield, rice in particular, has fallen from 20-30 maunds to 12-15 maunds per bigha over the last 20 years.

Our farmers are little aware — although they have some hazy ideas about the harmful effects of pesticides — that indiscriminate use of chemical fertiliser causes serious damage to soil fertility. Can we hold the successive governments' overemphasis on the production of cereal to the neglect of a comprehensive agricultural cultivation policy responsible for this predicament? Lentils, oil seeds and a number of spices were once cultivated in large areas of Bangladesh. The cultivation of diverse crops provided not only soil nutrition but also used to help fix nitrogen. That process was hampered greatly by paddy-alone cultivation policy and the ultimate damage was done by the overuse of chemical fertiliser. Besides, we have sometimes been a recipient of harmful agro-chemicals that were banned in developed countries.

Even now the government policy on the use of chemical fertiliser and pesticide suffers from indecision. Non-government initiatives to find effective alternatives to these chemical substances have been limited, although some progress has been made in that direction. The government's role in this regard cannot be over-emphasised. Our agricultural policy can, to a large extent, address the problem by shifting the emphasis from cereal production on to a wider crop diversification programme. The cost-benefit ratio favours that approach. After all, the price of cereals in the international market no longer justifies our paying any less attention to the cultivation of oil seeds, pulses etc which we import at a high price. Then we must look for using more and more organic fertiliser. The challenge is to produce it in bulk.

## Attention to Malaria

The foot-fall of Malaria on our territory where an estimated one hundred eighty thousand souls are exposed to its endemic revisitation world-wide, after long years of banishment, has sent disturbing signals to the WHO. And, judging by our front-page report on the subject yesterday, we have started lending our ears to that menacing foot-step. Even we are just about clambering on to the stage of being dove-tailed to the WHO's global strategy for the eradication of malaria through graded methods of prevention and treatment.

The moral proclaimed by the return of malaria is that we have to launch an exclusive drive against the malady without confusing it as part of the generalised health services which put it out of focus in the past. In other words, we are laying stress on the need for a national malaria eradication programme based on community participation and duly aided by a service delivery system operated by the government health complexes throughout the country. Communications will have to be improved where the malarial onslaught is lethal in its cerebral type, namely in the forested hill districts, including the sea-board Cox's Bazar. Let there be a greater number of blood-testing labs in the vulnerable areas to be able to tell the parasitic fever from the ordinary variety of fevers.

We are keenly awaiting the health ministry's policy statement on combating malaria, especially in view of the approaching monsoons which spawn the disease.

# Bureaucrats, Elected Representatives and Decentralisation

by Dr. James Manor

*The elected members and the chairs of decentralised councils need to behave as if they felt accountable to citizens. The main thing that ensures this is the threat that they might be thrown out by unhappy voters at the next election. In the old Upazila Parishads, this worked less well.*

A recent comparative study of democratic decentralisation in four Asian and African countries, including Bangladesh, identified three things which were absolutely essential in making decentralisation work well. First, substantial powers must be developed to elected representatives in decentralised institutions. Second, substantial resources must be available to those representatives and institutions. Third, the decentralised systems must ensure accountability.

This last comment refers to two different kinds of accountability. Civil servants must be secured by providing the latter with substantial powers. There is a need for some balance between civil servants and politicians, lest the latter behave in an unrestrained, overweening manner toward the former. But the problem with such systems worldwide is, much more often, that elected representatives have too little leverage to hold bureaucrats to account. That was not a severe problem in Bangladesh after 1985, but it tends to happen in many cases, so it needs to be noted for future reference even in Bangladesh.

Civil servants who work with decentralised institutions such as the old Upazila Parishads created in Bangladesh in 1985 are pulled in two different directions. They have long felt that they must answer to their superiors in their line ministries in the capital, and to senior civil servants (like the Upazila Nirbahi Officers) at the level at which they work. But if democratic decentralisation is to work well, they also need to be answerable to elected members of councils at the level at which they work (such as the Upazila Parishads).

If accountability to members and chairs of elected coun-

cils does not have at least equal weight with accountability to superior bureaucrats, then the system will not work well. In the old Upazila Parishads, this was sometimes a problem, but things usually went reasonably well.

The main way in which the accountability of bureaucrats to elected representatives can be secured is by providing the latter with substantial powers.

There is a need for some balance between civil servants and politicians, lest the latter behave in an unrestrained, overweening manner toward the former. But the problem with such systems worldwide is, much more often, that elected representatives have too little leverage to hold bureaucrats to account. That was not a severe problem in Bangladesh after 1985, but it tends to happen in many cases, so it needs to be noted for future reference even in Bangladesh.

The elected members and the chairs of decentralised councils need to behave as if they felt accountable to citizens. The main thing that ensures this is the threat that they might be thrown out by unhappy voters at the next election. In the old

Upazila Parishads, this worked less well.

The main reason was the effort by leaders at the national level to cultivate the chairmen of these bodies as clients and allies. The chairman received substantial favours from on high, and spent a lot of their time in Dhaka being lionised by central leaders. As a result, they often felt that they were mainly accountable to their patrons in Dhaka rather than to the voters in their Upazilas.

This led, in many cases, to misgovernance and malfeasance. And the result of that was the defeat, at elections in 1990, of a large majority of these chairmen. This did not cripple the old Upazila system, but it made the Parishads less responsive than they might have been and undermined the quality of governance that resulted from democratic decentralisation.

Policy makers in central governments who created decentralised systems need to take pains — in crafting the formal laws and rules that govern such systems, and especially in their informal behaviour once the institutions are functioning — to ensure that elected representatives feel ac-

countable to citizens. It is in the longer term interests of national leaders to do this, but most of them — in countries all over the world — tend to focus more on their short-term interests and on their need for allies and clients in lower-level areas.

It should be stressed that if decentralised bodies are allowed to exist for extended periods of time, their members and chairs will tend to become more aware of the need to be accountable to voters. This will happen because election defeats, which will occur for those who do not behave accountably, will provide stiff warnings to them. If the Upazila Parishads had survived for a longer period, many of the chairmen elected in 1990 would have remembered how many of their predecessors had been thrown out after five years, and some of them would have paid more attention to voters' needs and opinions.

The great difficulty with this idea is that high-level politicians in countries all across the world often tend not to permit decentralised institutions to survive for the long periods that are needed for this to happen. The evidence from a large

number of experiments with democratic decentralisation suggests that they work best when the elected chairs of decentralised bodies have power and status equal to or slightly greater than that of senior bureaucrats serving with those bodies. Rough comparability makes it easier for them both to work together and to prevent one another from going to excess.

It also means that any act of large-scale theft from public funds will probably require collusion by both of these two figures. Since they come from very different social backgrounds and professional cultures, collusion is often difficult to achieve.

In systems where civil servants have long enjoyed great status and power, elected representatives are likely to be easily overawed or over-ridden. For this reason, it is usually unwise to endow senior bureaucrats with even slightly greater power than elected leaders. A rough balance is best, with perhaps a bias towards elected representa-

tives. The importance of etiquette may sound insubstantial, even silly, but it is not. Democratic

decentralisation gains mighty when the architects of the new institutions take trouble over matters of protocol, and set down some recommended rules of etiquette for both elected representatives and bureaucrats (especially the latter) — to facilitate reasonably smooth relations between them. It is also useful to follow that up with seminars for both sets of people (separately and together) so that both are schooled in how to behave towards one another in a considerate manner. This is especially important when decentralised institutions are new, but it remains a priority over the long term too. And the more senior the civil servant or the politician is, the more crucial is such schooling.

Such codes of courtesy will assist everyone as they learn, piecemeal, how to relate to and negotiate with one another — as they learn what the limits of their powers are, and what expectations are realistic or exaggerated.

Dr. James Manor is a Professor of Political Science at the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex University. The original article was presented at a workshop hosted by The Asia Foundation on March 10-11 for government, donors, and NGOs on "Elected and Administrative Local Government Relations." This version has been specially prepared for The Daily Star.

## New Brooms Try to Sweep Away Past Hostility

by Yousaf Rafiq in Islamabad and DK Joshi in New Delhi

India and Pakistan have been enemies since independence 50 years ago, but the announcement of talks between the two prime ministers has raised hopes of better relations. Gemini News Service correspondents on both sides of the border report on how each country sees the opportunity.

wants to be accused of giving in to the other.

The two prime ministers have said they will meet soon, possibly in May, for the first such direct talks for seven years. These will follow a meeting of their foreign secretaries in New Delhi on 28 March.

The summit offers a historic opportunity as both countries approach the 50th anniversary of their independence.

Other nations are watching closely, because the unfriendly neighbours have fought three wars, and both the believed to have a nuclear capability. Neither has signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty or the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty.

Prospects for increased trade and the benefits of reduced military expenditure provide the long-term bait for the talks, but there is always the potential stumbling block of nationalist pressure for sabre rattling. Both governments would welcome a peace dividend, but neither

wants to be accused of giving in to the other.

Direct trade is worth about \$100 million a year, while bilateral trade via third countries — mainly Singapore and Dubai — has built up to total more than \$1.5 billion. Curbing the substantial smuggling that takes place would result in a useful rise in government revenues.

There is a brand new government and leadership in Pakistan," says an optimist of Government College, Islamabad.

The Indian Government is also relatively new, he says, and "its composition and chemistry are qualitatively different" from other administrations in New Delhi in recent years.

New Delhi insists that

Kashmir is an integral part of India, and accuses Islamabad of openly aiding militants there and in Punjab. It says the

insurgencies have almost ended — leaving Pakistan's policy in tatters.

Without progress on this issue, it will be difficult to initiate meaningful cooperation in economic and cultural fields."

India expects Islamabad to take a more "realistic" stand, instead of pressing for a plebiscite in the Kashmir valley, a proposition it dismisses as buried in the debris of time.

To break the impasse, Washington has suggested pushing Kashmir down the negotiating timetable and starting instead with talks on the demilitarisation of the 6,000-metre-high Siachen Glacier, the world's highest battlefield.

In a similar approach, on a recent visit to Pakistan, President Jiang Zemin of China advised his hosts to normalise relations with India by leaving aside major points of disagreement "for the time being. Smaller issues should be solved for the sake of development," he said.

New Delhi believes that peace between the two countries will follow the establishment of mutual trust, and that confidence-building measures are needed, such as a treaty of

peace, friendship and cooperation, a treaty pledging no first use of weapons of mass destruction, easing of visa restrictions, more cultural and social contacts and a framework for trade and economic cooperation.

As hopes grow for progress at the summit, pundits in Pakistan point out that Sharif has the confidence and standing that comes from an overwhelming parliamentary majority.

## To the Editor...

### 25th or 26th?

Sir, I was very puzzled to see that government was "supposedly" trying to celebrate the 25th anniversary of Independence on the 26th anniversary of Independence. All the newspapers had printed special articles to celebrate the "Silver Jubilee of Independence". Last year also, the people of Bangladesh celebrated the Silver Jubilee of Independence. I believe they did it duly so, because this year it is '97-71=26, not 25 and it needs a Class I student to do these simple calculations instead of renowned intellectuals who are "supposedly" silent.

As Awami League led the people of Bangladesh during the War of Liberation, so it is not expected that they would mis-calculate the historic occasion. If the government wanted to celebrate the Independence Day in a befitting manner, then, there was nothing wrong with the 26th anniversary of Independence.

I really do not know the reason of stretching the 25th year a bit longer. It is hard to believe that all the newspapers simply overlooked this fact. Is it just a simple mathematical mistake?

Reazur Rahman  
West Dhamundi, Dhaka.

### Weekly holiday

Sir, Following the dictates of the two great religions of the world, the western countries observe Saturdays and Sundays as weekly holidays. It also fits in happily with the ILO requirements of eight hours a day and forty hours a week. But the days are chosen purely on religious grounds: Saturday for the Jews, Sunday for the Christians. Free from work, on Saturdays, the Jews find their way to the synagogue, and on Sundays, the Christians attend the church to obtain salvation. For religious reasons, Parliament has passed legislation. Limited economic activities are allowed on Saturdays, and none on Sundays.

Before the British colonisation, without exception, the Muslim world observed Friday as weekly holiday. Although it is not obligatory in Islam, to facilitate the performance of Jumma prayer, holiday on Friday, which the Prophet (SM) termed as the best day of the week, is the most convenient. Friday is a festive day for the Muslims.

Following changes in Pakistan, some people are demanding to substitute Friday by Sunday as a weekly holiday. The reason is, they say, economic: when the western countries are open for business on Fridays, we are closed. We are losing a day more. But a close look at the situation believes this argument. When it is nine in the morning in Dhaka, it is nearly ten in the evening in New York. When the New Yorkers start their day at nine, it is eleven thirty in the evening in Tokyo, and midnight in Sydney. When the city of London is busy at ten in the morning, people have already finished their dinner at Sydney because it is already

eight in the evening. Even when the Muscovites start their day at nine, at the other end of their own country, at Vladivostock, offices are beginning to close at four thirty in the afternoon. No one can change this divine arrangement. And notwithstanding this, business is as usual and thriving between countries and continents, between New York and Tokyo, Sydney and London, and Moscow and Vladivostock. Hence the argument of losing a day is a false argument.

A nation can only rise by showing respect to its own beliefs and culture. Because of the vast number of Muslims living in the West, Islamic values are being recognised at the state level. CNN broadcast live the recitation of Holy Quran at the inauguration ceremony of the forty-second President of United States, and President Clinton, despite his very busy schedules, thought it worthwhile to spend some time at White House with the Muslim leaders on the occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr.

In Europe and America, Islam is the fastest growing religion. Sound of Azan from minarets are commonplace in the western capitals. In some cases it has replaced the church bells because Muslims have bought the disused churches. Wherever options are given, Muslims are taking Friday as a holiday.

In the second largest Muslim country of the world, it would be unfortunate and perhaps a manifestation of inferiority complex, if Sunday were to replace Friday as a holiday. Pakistan is not our model. We cannot follow her without any justification.

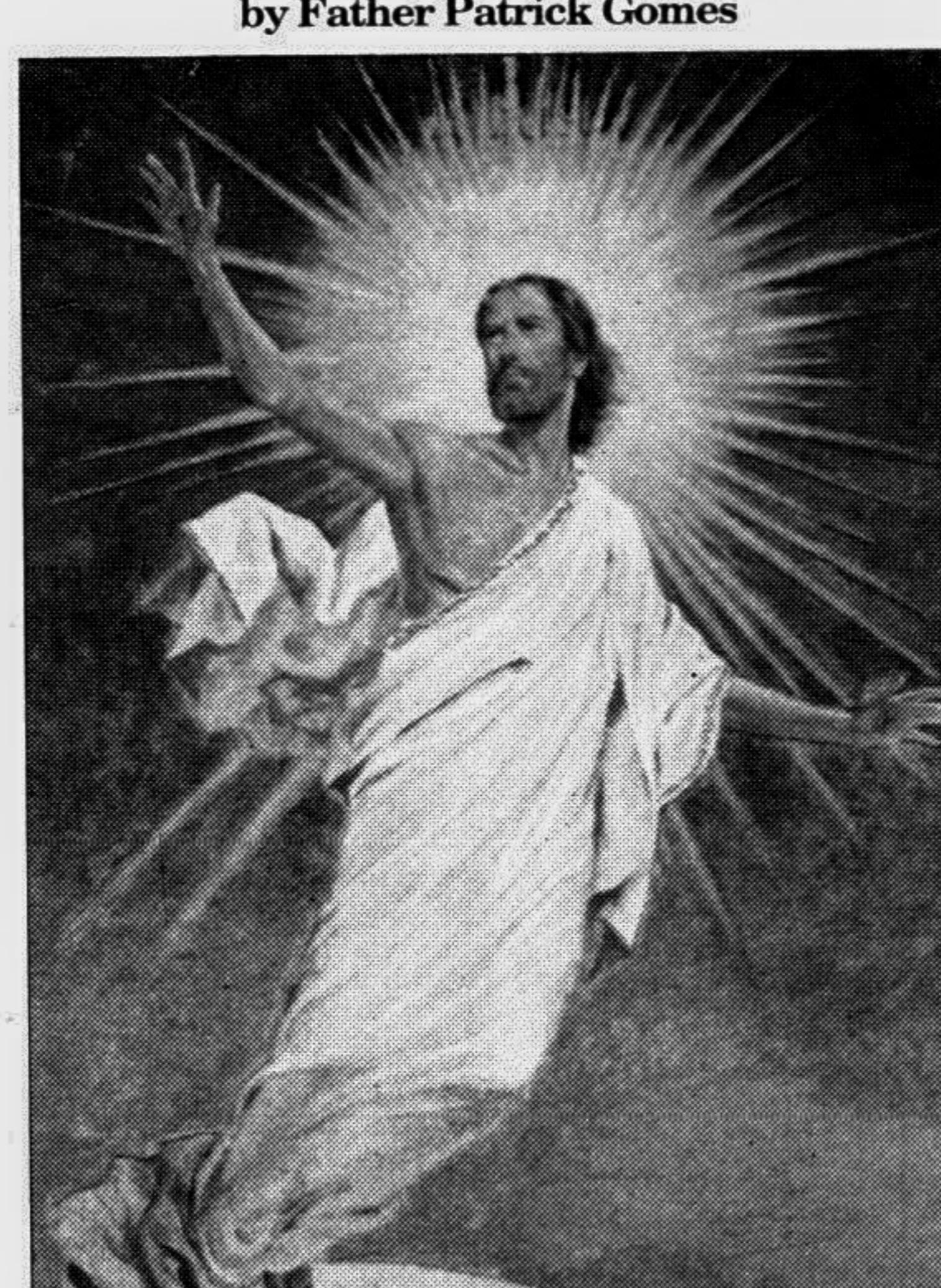
Abdur Razzak  
Advocate Supreme Court of Bangladesh.

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Sir, It is very gratifying to note that some letters have already been published, as was done on 13.3.97, in your esteemed paper, and hopefully more will follow along with a powerful editorial from you, in regard to a proposed change in the present weekly holiday from Friday to Sunday. Until some years ago, Sunday has always been the weekly holiday in this country as it is observed in all western countries and also in the entire South, South-East and Far-East Asia except Pakistan and Bangladesh. But, as we know, Pakistan has recently reverted to Sunday as their weekly holiday. Economic and trade has been stated as the main reason for this change. And undoubtedly this is also very vital for Bangladesh. Besides, the change would put our calendar in line with the worldwide calendar and our "weekend" would also have the same meaning.

In view of these and other cogent reasons it is earnestly hoped that our government also will consider the matter seriously and will decide to revert to Sunday as the weekly holiday of the country as in the past.

M D Razzak  
Sonadanga, Khulna



state of glory which was lost by the sin of Adam.

**He is Risen from the Dead**

After the Prayer of Consecration during the Eucharistic Liturgy (Holy Mass) the worshippers community professes its fundamental Christian faith singing: "Keep in mind that Jesus Christ has died for us; he is risen from the dead; he is lord for ever. This profession of faith clearly emphasises the close connection between the redemptive death of Jesus on the cross and his glorious resurrection. Through his death Christ manifested his greatest love for mankind. Through his death Christ obtained a tremendous power to place the universal salvation for mankind of all ages. Thus his death becomes the source and origin of universal salvation. And his glorious resurrection made him most glorified and exulted. Now he sits at the right hand of the Father interceding continually to the Father for mankind. He thus becomes the risen Lord who is now present among us through our faith and liturgy.

To fulfill the plan of salvation Christ's death was necessary for the glorification as it brought back man's salvation and opened the way to eternal life. His death brought death of and victory over sin. With his glorified state the whole humanity is brought back to the