

## FOCUS

## Opposition's Role in the Parliamentary Form of Governance

by Dr Moazzem Hossain

*In a parliamentary form of democracy, the opposition as an institution originates within the Parliament. Although it originates in the Parliament, it is the best and effective way to link the state with society. In the political science literature it has been argued that the 'acid test' of democracy is 'the toleration of opposition'.*

ALTHOUGH living out of the country for more than two decades, I have been keeping myself abreast with the political events in Bangladesh during this period. This was not due to my professional requirements but because of my personal interest on the political developments unfolding here over time. This interest has developed in me not only due to the eventful 21 years of Bangladesh, but also for my direct participation in the 11-point movement of 1969 and subsequently in the liberation movement in 1971 as a university student during those days. I thought I should provide this brief background in the start of the article because of the subject.

## Importance of Opposition

The word 'opposition' is very popular in Bangladesh. Through opposition movement and with unparalleled sacrifice of human lives, the nation has driven the culprits away to restore our mother tongue in 1952 and to achieve the ultimate goal of independent and sovereign Bangladesh in 1971. Subsequently, during the 25 years of independence the country has restored democracy by opposing the dictators of military origin. And in the future, a strong and a constructive opposition will be needed to steer the newly-found democracy to a mature stage in Bangladesh.

However, opposition as a separate topic of political study in Bangladesh so far has rarely been discussed with substance. In a parliamentary form of democracy, the opposition as an institution originates within the Parliament. Although it originates in the Parliament, it is the best and effective way to link the state with society. In the political science literature it has been argued that the 'acid test' of democracy is 'the toleration of opposition'. As we all know Britain is the bread and butter of the parliamentary form of governance and historically even in Britain it took more than a century to formally recognise opposition in the Parliament in the 19th century.

According to Sartori (*Opposition and Control*): 'An opposition that knows that it may be called to respond, i.e. which is oriented towards governing and has a reasonable chance to govern or to have access to governmental responsibility, is likely to behave responsibly, in restrained and realistic fashion on the other hand, a permanent opposition' which is far removed from governmental turnover and thereby knows that it will not

be called on to respond, is likely to take the path of 'irresponsible opposition' that is the path of promising wildly and out-bidding'.

## Functions of Opposition

The main functions of constitutional, responsible opposition are of four kinds. First, it stands in the wings of the political stage as an alternative government. During its period out of office the opposition's chief task is to recruit potential ministers from its ranks of backbenchers, and to weld them into a cooperating team. According to one British minister, 'a government can prepare adequately, for its term of office only during a sabbatical' on the opposition benches, since government's time in office is too taken up with the endless detail of administration'. Secondly, the opposition has to frame a set of policies so distinct from those of the government as to offer the electorate a genuine choice of alternatives. In the electorate a large number of voters are so-called 'swing-voters' who change their voting pattern with attractiveness of policies but not on a party line.

The third important task of the opposition is to collect and express the grievances that members of the community might have against the government. Democracy being above all a process of discussion and consultations, the voices of powerless minorities can have little impact unless amplified by the opposition party. Furthermore, if minority views are not taken up in the

public forum, they will either peter out altogether or revert to direct, and possibly violent, action. Fourthly, when the disparate voices of dissent are forged into a coherent and penetrating criticism of the government, the opposition uses its unique position continually to probe and question the government's activities, to keep it on its toes, to keep the government honest.

**Rise of Constitutional Opposition in Bangladesh**

The constitutional and responsible opposition, which we have been speaking theoretically in the above, exists very strongly in a two-party, parliamentary system. It is a rare form of opposition which can be found in the present-day parliamentary system. Even in Britain, the House of Commons is nowadays strongly represented by three parties: Conservatives, Labour and Social Democrats. In Bangladesh, in its very short history of parliamentary system, already a pattern of three-party parliament has been emerged: the Awami League, BNP and JP. Compared to previous term of parliament (1991-96) a strong opposition has emerged in the present term when the BNP is holding 114 members in a 300-member House. By all standards this is a strong opposition and the BNP's activities so far can be seen largely as a responsible

opposition except with a few incidents in recent weeks.

It is highly unlikely that this pattern of three-party system in the Parliament is going to disappear from Bangladesh soon. It is most likely that the two major parties (Awami League and BNP) are going to rule the country in turn for some time to come providing the present opposition acts as a responsible opposition. In this respect we are fortunate enough to embark on such a system within such a short period of parliamentary form of governance. This is a pattern unlike our neighbour (India) which has failed to cultivate two-party system of parliament in its fifty years of democracy. This pattern in Bangladesh can easily be compared with some developed countries such as Britain, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. One can learn from the experience from these countries that although they have the luxury of having mainly a two-party parliament but the dominant two parties suffer from factional infight within the party room. This type of development also can be ruled out from Bangladesh. It is known that the BNP has suffered from such a factional fight during the combined opposition's movement in 1995 and 1996. The government of the day did not take any lessons from the mature countries as those men-

tioned above to overcome the crisis and in turn had its toll in the general election of 1996.

In the parliamentary form of governance, it has been shown in the outside world that always opposition has the sympathy vote of the ordinary public since it is the underdog. To overcome such as psychological pressure the good government can never afford to make wrong and untimely decisions to defeat the opposition. In a democracy, any type of arrogant behaviour either on the part of opposition or of government will bring disaster for the party. Tolerance is the weapon, not agitation. In the field of political science, the study of factional behaviour within a party is most interesting nowadays. For example, it is now open to the Australian electorate that within the Labour party at least four factions are openly working. These are: right, centre, centre left and left. This type of factionalism is evident in a two-party system because the members gather from all sorts of ideological backgrounds under a party banner but unify themselves to fight opposition.

This factional infighting is

more acute within a party which forms government but less prominent when the party is in the opposition. In the present-day behaviour of both parties at least it has been emerged that the BNP is trying now to regroup itself and bring dis-

pline to the party ranks. On the other hand, the government is busy with its huge responsibility in managing the economy and to do this properly and effectively tension will run high in the cabinet and in the parliamentary body to gain supremacy of one member over other. To score points in the Parliament, the BNP must keep its eyes and ears open so that it does not miss out any opportunity of the government present making mistakes due to internal factional infight.

There is no point on the part of BNP to take the grievances on the street or outside the Parliament as they have been trying in recent times. It is the parliament and the electorate which will in turn put the party into government with its demonstrating superiority over the government in Parliament. One should not forget that, particularly under a two or three-party Parliament, it is likely that the present-day opposition would be in government tomorrow. As mentioned earlier, Bangladesh is lucky that it is unfolding with a system which is a luxury of only a few developed countries in the world. We should not miss this natural opportunity out and should not be guided by political adventurism and intolerance which will be suicidal for all parties which harbour such an attitude. To reduce tension and discomfort between the major parties either in the government or in the opposition we must take lessons from comparable mature democracies where this system is in place for a long period of time.

## Lessons from Mature Democracies

One of the lessons immediately comes into mind is the formation of shadow cabinet or ministries by the Opposition. This idea was not new in Bangladesh. Already *The Daily Star* has run a news on this topic recently. The four countries which I mentioned above as parallel to ours, all of them have shadow cabinets which is in fact an alternative government placing itself in the wings to form government if opportunity arises in the next election. To introduce such a system the government has also a significant role to play. It must arrange for both the government and the opposition backbenchers to pay visit to countries such as Britain, Australia, Canada and New Zealand so that they can gain first track knowledge about the shadow cabinet and ministry.

In the budget, government must allocate some resources for the shadow cabinet to allow perks and allowances for the members. One would not expect things would happen overnight but the process needs to start now so that the Opposition also play its constructive and constitutional role to manage the economy with legitimacy and with formal recognition as an alternative government. This opportunity will make them to go back to the drawing board to think about new policies and strategies and present them to electorate before the holding of the next election.

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the affairs from now itself. We hope that our Prime Minister would kindly keep an eye constantly on this matter considering the 'efficiency' of the education sector for the betterment of our children.

Conduction of the rest of the examinations, evaluation of answer scripts, tabulation process, declaration of results etc., should be carried out under strict vigil of honest and efficient supervisors. Merit list should be done away with as it is a mysterious affair. Who is the best is the most difficult task to judge in this vulnerable system of examination and evaluation.

A lot of legends are prevailing regarding the 'education boards' and centering round the SSC examination. Activities of the education boards seem to be far below the required standard.

It was also not known if other examinations would be held under date and time. Reported leakage of many other questions has thrown the students and the guardians into the swoop of uncertainty. What was exasperating for the students and the guardians was that the shaky and indecisive dealing of the affairs by the Education Ministry and its subordinate offices. No clear instructions or explanations were issued whereas the circumstances demanded clear decisions and frequent announcements in the media. Frequent failures of electricity added fuel to the tension. The students, instead of studying, impatiently waited and sat before the television sets for any announcement but electricity disengaged them again and again. Of course, it was the pathetic condition of the rural areas and areas outside Dhaka. In Dhaka, all lucky ones live and they might have got the information through their remote sensing sources.

The Education Minister termed the leakage episode as a motivated act. What he meant by this remains obscure and this statement appears to be out of another motivated act. At least the later activities and indecisiveness do not evidently reflect his efficient dealing of the affairs. Constitution of committees were very much es-

sential to prove the episode but that was not enough to guide the students to the right track.

Their anxieties and lack of information about holding of other examinations were not satisfied by the constitution of committees. Clear guidance and information were necessary to ease their anxiety.

Well, the Education Minister should have been well aware of the fact that such 'motivated acts' are following the government like shadows and education sector is not anyway an exception to remain away from the purview of the activists.

SSC Examination is a very sensitive field for such acts and a single act is enough to upset the entire process. Utmost care and precautions were inextricably to deal with entire process of this examination. Before the minister blamed any such thing like 'motivated act', the process demanded his efficient and careful dealing. When the act had occurred his detection of it automatically became infructuous.

It evinces a serious lacking in efficient and careful dealing of the process. Whatever we say or do will not be adequate to compensate the trauma inflicted on the examinees and the people and ultimately on the nation.

Last year also, we observed, when thousands of our children along with their guardians were going through heart-breaking torments on the SSC results, the officials were beating about the bush aggravating the situation; the Education Minister remained inactive. It was only after the Prime Minister's intervention that the sufferings were mitigated to some extent. The Education Minister's timely action could save the children from sufferings long before and the Prime Minister could avoid an awkward situation.

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## Is there a Day Without Crises?

by F Ahmed

**I**t may be mentioned here that the loadshedding will not only jeopardise immediate physical security of the society but also the economic security of the nation with production of most industries/factories etc., going down fast.

It seems a series of crises is manifesting itself one after another these days. On top of all, this is the power crisis with all its consequences during the current hot spell — mosquito menace, water shortage and lack of security during the dark hours. This was not so only a few months ago.

So what has happened all of a sudden that people are being subjected to such hardships at a time when the students are supposed to prepare for and appear at their important examinations? Could it not be foreseen? Could there be no alternative solutions? The PDB is mentioning a decline in power generation and the REB/DESA/DESCO are blaming the PDB for failure to supply the required amount, but what was the situation even a year ago? The government may have changed but the authorities concerned — from the highest to the lowest — were and are there, still in place! Do they not feel responsible for what is going on?

Reports are there that PDB and REB officials/ Staff are under attack here and there and

matter and not just routing enquiries, reports and eventual shelving!

After having toiled hard, the SSC candidates appeared at their English Paper I exam and now they stand the risk of failing it again! The Second Paper has also gone uncertain and so are others. Why is the arrangement so poor, and not leak-proof? We don't know who will answer this question but we are sure all these will only add to the points against the government who have to be cautious in placing people at the helm of affairs. Does it not look like we don't have dedicated people to deliver the goods and no one a beyond doubt? This is a state of affairs which we must not befall by the grace of the Almighty. We have to get out of it.

When the government has just solved one problem, it appears as though another problem is being created. If this goes on for a long time the socio-political norms and structure will be destroyed. As such, we have to guard against all these eventualities and ensure that things are taken care of before it is too late.

Killing, acid throwing and social unrest are again on the rise. Everyday, the newspapers depict awful scenes of brutality of a varied type. Let's not describe this horrible picture. But what are the authorities doing in this regard? Some of the police personnel themselves appear to be involved in many a crime. Should they not be severely punished with exemplary punishments and not just 'closed' only to diffuse public tension? If the enforcers of law fall themselves, who will prevail upon them? Serious thought needs to be given to the

## Leakage of SSC Questions: Motivated Act or Inefficiency?

by Abdul Latif Molla

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not even get the right information. Anxiety of the students knew no bounds.

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