

Talbott Initiatives

US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott's visits to New Delhi and Islamabad undertaken as those were to discuss the complex aftermath of the nuclear tests in South Asia, could not have been billed for instant results. In practical terms, while understanding of each other's concern and points of view improved appreciably, new elements have inflated the list of agenda at the respective bilateral levels as well as trilaterally with "steady and on-going talks" being visualised to moot a whole lot of issues.

In his talks with Talbott, Jaswant Singh, the Indian PM's Chief Advisor rebuilt on the China-centred threat perception of his country asking for a nuclear trade-off to meet her security concerns. It is widely believed that India has expressed its readiness to sign the NPT but only in return for a nuclear-related technology. India is keen on a package deal with the USA covering issues like missile testing, weaponisation, free transfer of high technology, and enhanced economic interaction with removal of sanctions in the tow. Her point of pressure has been what she has all along perceived as 'discriminatory clauses' of the CTBT badly requiring to be amended. So, she is for not only retention of the nuclear prowess but improving upon it as well without having to carry out further tests. It seems she would not be disagreeable to a cut in fissile material in exchange for a free high technology transfer.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee is likely to repeat his no-first-use offer to his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif in their scheduled Colombo talks. A new dimension to his offer seems to be an express Indian hope that with Pakistan and India signing for it China could be persuaded to do the same vis-a-vis India.

Although Pakistan is apparently side stepped in India's security perception it is her concern over China-Pakistan cooperation that tugs Pakistan along as well. The talks between Talbott and Pakistan Foreign Secretary Shamsahad Ahmed were a somewhat different kettle of fish. Pakistan sought an internationally mediated role in resolving the Kashmir flash-point as part of the current global concern over nuclearisation in South Asia. India refrains holds on to bilateral approach. It is worthwhile to recall that the Simla Pact which binds the two countries to a negotiated settlement of the Kashmir issue were facilitated by international urgings.

Pakistan's economy being more dependent on foreign loans than India's, is in for trouble with its 600 million US dollars forex reserve and dwindling debt repayment capacities. The worries were conveyed to Talbott. Pakistan seemingly viewed its signing of CTBT as being contingent upon security guarantees.

Public WCs

There are at least two sides to the toilets-in-the-city question, mooted on Tuesday at a Daily Star mini roundtable. The public-hygiene-sanitation aspect comes pat to them who think in macro terms of organisation for a better city life. The other aspect is purely human and individual. What do you do when stuck up at the DU area, specially if you are diabetic. As all the world knows Bengalees are a loose-stomached people, suffering perpetually from dysentery. There is hardly any answer to the predicament such standard characters fall into whenever out of home or office for hours.

Of the eighty lakh people that are said to reside in Dhaka, one-tenth live in shacks, improvisations in bamboo and polythene. You enter them igloo-wise but never sit upright, not to dare standing. Some hundreds of these huddled together are called slums — an abject misnomer. Slums have toilets and water connections. There is no question of these shacks having them. Seven to ten lakh residents of the city as such urinate and defecate out into the open. In terms of public hygiene there cannot be another hell like this in the cities of the world. The government must either settle them with roofed accommodation or entice them back to the villages — with money and jobs.

Dhaka's new toilets, which must be here by the scores, may be so made and maintained as to make people feel like walking into them instead of avoiding them with any revulsion.

Why a Blanket Ban?

The government has slapped a blanket ban on sending women abroad as housemaids and nurses. While a freeze on the first category was already on and with some justification, the second has come under the prohibitive purview freshly with some questions to ask. Government's sensitivity to the problems of our women workers abroad is appreciated but its wholesale spurning of manpower export in the nurses' category is hardly understandable. There is no denying that Bangladeshi women sent abroad as housemaids were subject to abuse more often than not. And this happens mostly to those who are smuggled out of the country by unscrupulous and unauthorised agents.

But it should not be forgotten that this country has a great potential for earning foreign exchange through exporting trained professionals to foreign countries. For instance, there is a global scarcity of good nurses. Bangladesh can very well wrest the initiative by concentrating on the export of efficient nurses abroad.

The labour secretary himself dwelt on the training aspect saying that Bangladeshi workers lose out with their rivals from other South Asian countries like Sri Lanka and the Philippines mainly due to their inability to speak in English.

Instead of taking a discreetly exploratory view of things, what the government has done can be best described as a knee jerk reaction. Government has to study the reasons why women workers from our country suffer abroad and formulate its policy accordingly. It has to find out the channels through which women and children are trafficked out of the country and seal them off as far as possible. It will be to our long term benefit if nurses are sent out on foreign employment after meeting our own requirement.

President Clinton in China: Convergence of Interests

China has obtained recognition from the sole Superpower of the right to play on the world stage on a near equal footing. On Asian affairs China's voice will carry a lot of weight.

By all accounts, the 9-day visit of President Bill Clinton to China has been a great success. The image of the First US family heading home, from the new Hong Kong international airport, beaming with satisfaction, was the true picture of a visit full of minefields negotiated with great dexterity and *savoir-faire*. The one outstanding image of the visit was its openness. Starting with the touristic visit of places of historical interest, the visit all the way was marked by frankness and warmth. The China-US relations have taken a giant leap forward.

The most important gain for China is recognition by the US that she is a major player on the world stage. There appeared like convergence of interest when the leaders of the two countries took a common stand against proliferation of nuclear weapons particularly in the context of recent nuclear explosions by two South Asian nations — India and Pakistan.

While the US has been campaigning ceaselessly for years against proliferation of nuclear weapons, China seemed more than willing to join in with the US.

President Clinton accepted the Chinese demand for entry into the World Trade Organisation (WTO). This has been a sore point with China and President Clinton willingly obliged. Through this method China was being drawn in the world trade system. This was another step for China to appear on the world trade forum.

Although President Clinton and his entourage insisted that there was no change in the US policy on the question of Taiwan, the fact that President Clinton articulated that policy from the soil of China carried a quite different meaning. The

US is pledged not to abandon Taiwan, but at the same time, she has through the just concluded visit has greatly strengthened her ties with China. Two Chinas have been abandoned long time ago and the assertiveness of China can only isolate Taiwan further. It is really a matter of time before Taiwan rejoins China — the motherland.

Shortly before the visit a lot of hullabaloo was raised, specially in the US Congress, regarding the incident at Tien An Men square nearly ten years ago. Like any other Head of State, President Clinton was officially welcomed there with the usual Chinese fanfare and the US President quite rightly did not raise the matter at all.

The Horizon This Week

Arshad-uz Zaman



The US media continuously harped on the ruthless manner by which the student uprising at the Tien An Men square was quelled, but President Clinton in order not to spoil the excellent atmosphere of the visit, refused to be drawn in on that ten-year-old episode.

From the capital Beijing where President Clinton signed a number of agreements with his Chinese host Jiang Ze Min,

he proceeded to the headquarters of China's capitalism Shanghai, with its tourists attractions, neon lights and high-rise buildings. President Clinton must have marvelled at the robust health of China's economy. In fact at every turn President Clinton heaped praise on his Chinese hosts. He praised China for playing a stabilising role in the current economic crisis in East Asia. President

Clinton went into the share market of Shanghai and saw the operations.

If President Clinton side-stepped sensitive issues, his Chinese hosts in return opened the media entirely to him. In fact it is the first time that the Chinese were practising what goes by the name of open society. President Clinton had a free wheeling meeting with the students of the Beijing University. He had very free exchanges with the students and there was never any suspicion that it was stage-managed. Some remarkably candid question and answer sessions took place. The question were polite but often hard-hitting and President Clinton, the highly articulate politician, handled them deftly.



The Opposition Should Play its Role

by M Harunur Rashid

In order of institutionalised parliamentary democracy in this part of the world the Opposition should come forward with positive attitude and at the same time the opposition should be allowed to play their right role...

THE Presence of a strong Opposition in a parliamentary system is inevitable for keeping a constant check on the government. The effect of opposition criticism is to maintain a close relation between the Government policy and the public opinion. In order to perform the role of the opposition, it is vital that Opposition should be strong, viable, responsible, both in quality and quantity, that it presents to the 'adversary' — the party in power — a solid front, that it is well informed and vigilant. The importance of the Opposition in the system of parliamentary government has long received practical recognition in the procedure of the British Commonwealth. To quote professor Keith:

The opposition seeks power to effect the changes it desires but it does not seek power by means which deny democracy. There are standards of fair dealing which are normally respected and which if any party should violate it endeavours to prove in reality still intact. It follows therefore that there must be co-operation above all in arranging the business of the House. It is not the right of the government to stifle criticism, it must, therefore, put down for discussion such financial items as the Opposition wish to discuss. It must find time for the procedure of a vote of censure. On the other hand it expects reasonable, and from the Opposition in dealing with, non-contentious business and in arranging the use of parliamentary time. Co-operation is also sought when issues approach such a crisis that in action would be dangerous to the public welfare.

The Privileges of the House as a whole and the Privileges of the parliament are to be jealously guarded by every one, but the major responsibility falls on the Opposition, particularly the leaders of the Opposition. The political opposition is an inseparable part of every party system. The nature and character of the opposition vary from one party system to another. The opposition's existence is found in every type of party system, with a crucial role assigned to it. Smt. Indira Gandhi described the roles of the ruling and opposition parties in parliamentary democracy in the following memorable words:

"Parliamentary democracy cannot function without mutual respect of the government in power and the opposition for the respective roles. The very foundation of parliamentary democracy is based on recognition by the majority party, which has been voted to power, to govern the country for the term prescribed by the Constitution and to pursue its declared programmes."

Now coming to the question of importance of the role of the opposition in country like ours where parliamentary democracy is still an infant, I think it would be very much pertinent to highlight the historical background of the idea of parliamentary opposition. The idea of a parliamentary opposition began to evolve mainly after the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 in the United Kingdom, while the Opposition was emerging as a well organised part of the British political system. The phrase 'His Majesty's Loyal Opposition' was first coined in 1826 by John Cam Hobhouse who carried the reputation of being a radical statesman. Dictionaries and books on political philosophy define the opposition mainly as a party that opposes the government or party in power.

In special sense of the term, the opposition normally means a coherent group of people, regularly acting together, and able to present themselves collectively to the electorate as an alternative government with an alternative policy.

Ivor Jennings sketched the role of the opposition in a Parliamentary Democracy in the following pattern:

"The Government tends to regard the opposition as the brake on a car going uphill and where the opposition thanks that the car is going down hill, uphill and downhill are terms relative to some notion of level and there is no recognised standard by which the impartial, if there were such a person, could determine his conclusion."

Edward Shils examined the need for a coherent and responsible opposition in political Democracy. He observed:

"The effective and continuous existence of political democracy requires a fairly coherent and responsible opposi-

tion to the ruling party working within the rules of the parliamentary game. This opposition should not simply interest itself in the obstruction and depreciation of the majority. It should be capable of criticizing the majority's measures on the basis of detailed and realistic information about the situation in the country and the performance of the executive. The opposition should be sufficiently coherent to control or to isolate extremists who do not wish to work within the constitutional system. The opposition must be able to resist the temptations of conspiracy and subversion, and the governing party must like-wise avoid the idea that opposition is in itself, a step in the direction of subversion."

The views held by India political scientists and leaders on this theme are not much different. C P Bhambhri summarised the importance of the opposition in a parliamentary democracy as the following:

An effective opposition is very necessary for the right functioning of parliamentary democracy. But it is not the business of the opposition to obstruct the Government. Its purpose is to criticise and not to hinder. Obstruction brings parliamentary Government into contempt. The Government must govern and the opposition must oppose. The Government has the power to obstruct... but neither kind of obstruction is desirable because it leads to confusion and results in inefficiency."

Renu Saxena defined the role of the opposition in a Parliamentary Democracy in the following language:

The existence of opposition is the most distinctive characteristic of parliamentary democracy; it is like its blood. Democracy admits of dissent and conflict which give rise to opposition. Parliamentary Democracy needs an opposition, most of it is to function effectively and successfully. No leader or party can overcome the temptation of becoming dictatorial, autocratic and arrogant without the watchful eye of a strong, viable, well informed vigilant opposition. It is the opposition that can expose the

mistakes, the errors, the failures, the corruption, the lack of honesty and integrity, the readiness to resort to most unscrupulous methods and means to achieve the ends and objectives of the rulers."

In the British Parliament, considered the Mother of Parliaments, 'her Majesty's opposition' performs two roles: it seeks to expose the deficiencies of Her Majesty's Government, and ultimately to replace it. It is thus an 'office seeking opposition,' with the Leader of the Opposition posing as an alternative Prime Minister and his leading colleagues as alternative Ministers. It is in this context that in UK the terms 'shadow cabinet' or the 'alternative cabinet', are to be interpreted. Gilbert Campion having in view the two-party system in the United Kingdom, rightly defined the parliamentary opposition in the following way:

The opposition is the party for the time being in the minority, organised as an unit and officially recognised, which has had experience of office, is prepared to form a government when the existing ministry has lost the confidence in the country. It must have a positive policy of its own and not merely oppose destructively to ruin the game for the sake of power.

Ivor Jennings, an eminent British political scientist, underlines the important role of opposition in democracies, particularly parliamentary democracies, by his observation that: "The duty of the opposition is to oppose... that duty is the major check which the constitution provides upon corruption and defective administration. It is too, the means by which individual injustices are prevented... It is a duty hardly less important than that of a government... It is the recognition by both sides of the house that government governs openly and honestly, and that it is prepared to meet criticism not by secret police and concentration camps, but by rational argument."

In a two party system the opposition tends to be real institution and a potential government, as in England. In a democracy the opposition has a certain valuable and construc-

ive role to play. A strong opposition is as essential to the proper working of the parliamentary system as is a stable and strong ruling party. Parliamentary system rests upon three principles — the principles of representation, discussions and responsibility. Parliamentary government is essentially a government by discussion and compromise and it implies not only a parliamentary majority but also a 'parliamentary minority.' The majority party runs the government and the minority party tries to expose the defects in the working of the majority party. Parliamentary government is a government by criticisms; it is a government by expositions and therefore it has to be governed by two parties, viz, a party in power and party in opposition. The essential feature of a democracy is that the opposition should have the right to exist, to express itself and to seek the mandate of the voters to replace the government. The legitimate existence of organised groups — especially political parties — that oppose, criticise and attempt to replace the ruling elite can be viewed 'as very nearly the most distinctive characteristic of democracy itself.'

The role of the opposition is a part of the process of opposition. Rodney Barker comprehensively articulates the role of the opposition as: (i) total resistance to the form and basis of the state; (ii) resistance to the power of oppressive institution of the state; (iii) resistance against the denial of legitimacy; (iv) system of checks and balances; (v) methods whereby the citizen or a group without condemning government on being inherently oppressive, modify its action, mellow its harshness and prevent its tyrannies.

To my little understanding the role of the opposition party is firstly, to constantly and vigilantly watch the functioning of the Government and the ruling party; secondly, to expose the mistakes and blunders committed by the Government and the ruling party, and lastly, to provide an alternative programme to the people, an alternative practice philosophy and an alternative ideology, so that, ultimately, it can convince the people about its capacity to give a better governance or administration than the one given by the party in power. And I personally believe that a stout opposition is the essence of democracy.

At this point let me make it clear that the parliament of Bangladesh is not a sovereign body — uncontrolled and with unlimited powers in the same sense as the British Parliament is. It functions within the bounds of a written constitution. Its legislative authority is hedged in by various limitations. All these limitations tend to qualify the nature and extent of the authority and jurisdiction of parliament. Nevertheless, the parliament occupies a pivotal position in the present day.

The Parliaments and Parliaments in Commonwealth countries have already raised their voices as to how the role of Opposition can be made more effective and meaningful as well. To that end an international seminar was organised recently by the Commonwealth Secretariat in conjunction with Commonwealth Parliamentary Association wherein Treasury Bench of Bangladesh Parliament was represented by vet-

The format for the joint press conference between President Clinton and President Jiang Ze Min, where they stood before their microphones, was not a bit different from Washington. The two leaders faced questions and answered them like well-practised politicians. It was the first time for the Chinese leader and he too came out with flying colours. President Jiang Ze Min donned the robe of the American politician when he took the baton of the Chief D'orchestre and conducted the orchestra.

President Clinton's visit to China concluded with his final stop — Hong Kong. It also coincided with the first anniversary of Hong Kong's return to Chinese rule. Hong Kong, the last Jewel in the Crown, is making a transition to the progressive integration with China, while maintaining its legacy left by the British. President conferred among others with the leader of the opposition.

The First Family, boarding Air Force One was a pleasing sight. For nine days President Bill Clinton, his wife Hillary and daughter Chelsea, had left behind the worries that have dogged them for the better part of the second term of presidency. The US media invariably carries the smiling face of Kenneth Starr and no doubt he will continue to harass the President for the rest of his term.

To sum up, China has obtained recognition from the sole Superpower the right to play on the world stage on a near equal footing. On Asian affairs China's voice will carry a lot of weight. Tibet was virtually forgotten.

In return, China opened herself up like she never did in the past. This carries important implications for the future. The restless youth of China will be fascinating to watch.

eran parliamentarian Suranjit Sengupta while the Opposition was represented by former finance minister Saifur Rahman. The seminar held in London was attended by the parliamentarians from all over the world wherein the role of the opposition in parliamentary democracy was adequately addressed. The Commonwealth parliamentarians did put their heads together to devise a mechanism to further strengthen the role of the Opposition both within and outside the parliament.

With a view to strengthening the role of the opposition in parliament and to give them more time, Speaker Humayun Rashed Choudhury very recently introduced two new ideas which he gathered during his recent visit to the House of Commons. These are, firstly to keep half an hour time open for unscheduled discussion on any issue and the members of Opposition bench who can draw the attention of the Speaker can speak for first 15 minutes. This idea was thoroughly discussed in the meeting of the Business Advisory Committee and it was straight-away adopted in the House which in fact gave the Opposition an ample opportunity to express their grievances and this can be termed something like zero hour in parliamentary practice.

The second new idea of the Speaker was referable to the committee on the Rules of Procedure which actually reacts to the amendment of the Rules of Procedure. The idea was all about the preparation of the orders of the day. The Speaker narrated that in the House of Commons, after disposal of asking and answering of questions and notices on calling attention to matters of urgent public importance, the rest of the orders of the day for one-tenth working days of a year being prepared in consultation with the leader of the Opposition. He is of the opinion that these ideas would enable the opposition to make best use of their time in terms of making speeches in Parliament. Nevertheless, it reflects the impartial and non-partisan attitude of the presiding officer which is equally important in proper functioning of parliament.

We all know that parliament represents the collective will of the people and the presiding officer is collectively responsible to parliament as per article 55(3) of our Constitution. In order of institutionalised parliamentary democracy in this part of the world the Opposition should come forward with positive attitude and at the same time the opposition should be allowed to play their right role failing which, I am afraid, the democracy cannot be sustained. The peaceful cohabitation of position and opposition in politics can develop a proper political culture only which can protect us from political chaos and confusion. To that end the position should do away with adversarial attitudes and come up with constructive suggestion and programmes.

Here again it is the duty of the party in power to allow the opposition to play their right role knowing full well that the opposition parties under parliamentary system indulge in unnecessary and baseless criticism of the policies of the government with a view to discredit it in the eyes of the voters. In doing so both the government and opposition should remember that democracy is a way of life and democracy is its adherents certain qualities like tolerance, respect for differing views, and freedom for all to express their grievances and seek legitimate remedies.

The author is a judicial officer now working as Law Officer to Parliament

To the Editor...

The Mayor's invitation!

Sir, Recently a news item published in the *Banglabazar Patrika* (7 July '98) drew my attention. It said that the Mayor of Chittagong City Corporation had invited 50,000 people for a traditional 'Mejban' in observance of 'chehlim' of his father at an expenditure of 25 lakh taka. Since there was no contradiction or the news item from the Mayor, it can be taken to be true.

The Mayor, as everybody knows a rich man could invite fifty lakh if he wanted to. But isn't there a guest control order of the government operative in the country that says permission had to be taken for each additional guest beyond one hundred for any such party? There was also a fee for each additional guest and the total number of guests was also fixed at 500 at the most. It meant nobody could invite as many guests as he liked even if he paid for them.

So how could the Mayor in-

vide fifty thousand people and slaughter 60 cattlehead (or may be more) and 200 goats for the Hindus? Did he take prior permission from the authority concerned and pay the additional charge? Had the Government received the due revenue?

These are some of the questions needed to be answered by relevant quarters and also the tax on income paid by the Mayor annually to the government exchequer had to be ascertained.

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The 'visa' pang

Sir, Bangladeshi citizens who want to go out of the country can not easily forget the ordeal of obtaining Visa from some of the foreign embassies in Dhaka.

Firstly he or she, young or old, healthy or sick will have to procure visa form personally from those embassies early in the morning standing on the

road on 'first come first served' basis. If anybody is lucky he/she can get it in a day or two before presenting the filled-up form with all the requisite popery documents (ticket hotel reservation invitation letter, financial support evidences including statement of accounts in bank!!) to the visa officer again standing in a room small enough to accommodate four or five persons. Some Embassies/High commissions have not even bothered to arrange a room for that! They use the pavement for that purpose. The visa officer very often act like a goal keeper who like to check people from getting visa and persons who get the visa feel like a lucky player who wins by obtaining the visa.

It really bothers me. Why those developed countries equipped with modern devices cannot find a way to give visa to people or to refuse visa to people in a decent way. Why a traveller or a visitor have to waste two or three days standing in the sun, or in the rain to get a visa to go to any country maybe only for

one or two days? It is not that everybody wants the visa for living forever in those countries illegally. Business, tourism, official duties meetings, seminars, workshops etc., sometimes compel people to go to some countries. People without any bad intention of living in those countries may like to visit or travel to any countries of the world. At least they deserve to be treated like human beings, and not to wait in the sun or in the rain on the roadside hours after hours to get a visa form or to get entry into the revered premises. One feels like a beggar standing in a queue by the gate waiting for zakat money or lungi or saree before Eid-ul-Fitre. Can the Foreign Ministry not find a way to ease the ordeal by discussing with those foreign countries? I am sure they know the procedures of issuing visa by all the Embassies in Dhaka. It should be their job and they should take care of the citizens of this country.

M Khan
Dhaka