

## PMO, Peer and a Children's Park

WE want to ask three questions. First, can the political liaison officer at the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) ask the Mayor to hand over any land belonging to the city to anybody? Has the Mayor any right to hand over land meant for parks to anybody, even if the PM orders it? (After all there must be strict procedure for dealing with public land). Finally, under what authority was the Mayor turning a children's park into a shopping complex in the first place?

Using an official pad, the political liaison officer of the highest executive office of the country, writes to the Mayor, with a copy to the DC, formally asking for the hand-over of a piece of land meant for a children's park, to a peer (religious leader). How dare he? Who has authorised him to write a letter to the Mayor? How does it come under the purview of his duties? The action was illegal and the perpetrator should be immediately charged under appropriate law for a serious offence, criminal if we are not mistaken. It is a clear example of misuse of power, authority and prestige of the PMO. Here again immediate appropriate action is necessary to protect the PMO from such staff. This political liaison officer has not only crossed the boundaries of his duty but is obviously indulging in land related deals amounting to theft of public property.

The incident clearly points out that PMO staff, at least some of them, are misusing their office and are involved in all sorts of activities that are undermining the PMO and giving rise to claims of corruption, nepotism and interference in the normal functioning of the government. *Tadbir*, or lobbying for deals, appointments, promotions and transfer of government servants and awarding tenders to particular parties are some of the accusations that are currently in circulation against a certain section of PMO staff. The Prime Minister must get to the bottom of this particular incident and investigate the role of all her staff and clear the name of her office, and also set standards for the future. This she should do as much for her own sake, as for the rest of us. The Mayor, it appears, is not going to hand over the land on the ground that there is a standing order of the Prime Minister that no construction can be made on land meant for parks. We commend him for his stand and urge him to stick to it. However, we cannot but ask that given the standing order of the PM how was he planning to turn the parkland into a shopping complex as is evident from his own plans of two years ago?

A scandal is going on all over the city concerning city parks, especially in the old town. Those that are not to be grabbed by the rich and the powerful, are being used for drug dealing, prostitution and related crimes. Practically none are usable by the children of the locality. Mr. Mayor, we urge you that you give the park back to the citizens, especially the children, and this you do with single-minded devotion. Prime Minister, please help the Mayor in this action. Let us remember you both for this farsighted act for the sake of our children.

## Defaulters from Within

SUBSCRIBERS owe Bangladesh T&T Board a staggering sum of Taka 642 crore. There has not been any change in the situation after written orders were issued by Post and Telecommunications Minister Mohammad Nasim to realise the outstanding amounts from defaulters. The defaulters include government, semi-government and private organisations. And importantly, as far as individual defaulters are concerned, former and present members of the parliament (MPs) alone owe the Board an amount of Taka 8.86 crore. This is altogether an unacceptable scenario because the Board feared there was little possibility of realising an amount of Taka 102 crore in unpaid bills. True that we have not been able to devise a standard and reliable mode of bill-payment system. But that doesn't mean that telephone users, especially in the government and among the MPs would go on dodging bills.

We think it is an unforgivable act on the part of the parliamentarians not to be paying their arrear bills especially when they are given a monthly telephone allowance of Taka 4,000. And they are in a much better position to have any errors in their bills corrected because of their clout. Now the question that arises in our mind is, they are using the facility in excess of their monthly telephone allowance, so that they are required to pay the differential from their own pockets. This is how they have run into a huge arrear. But as lawmakers they cannot be lawbreakers without paying a price for it. We expect the former and serving MPs to pay up this utility-services bills.

The existing method of paying telephone bills is flawed in that the payment is not readily registered with the revenue office of the T&T Board. Computers need to be used there. Preferably we would like to see one-stop service introduced in matters of bill payment. But this should not provide any excuse for the MPs and the government defaulters to dodge payment of the arrears.

## Irresponsible Celebrations

SONALI Bank employees' union delayed its celebration of the Independence Day by at least three days but did not forget to disrupt the normal banking and other important activities at the bank's headquarters. All this happened on Wednesday. Present at the function was the home minister as chief guest. This is a disturbing sign as the biggest bank in the nationalised sector decides to flout the government drive to control trade union activities in the banking sector. It was an embarrassing situation at the bank as an officer confided to The Daily Star reporter. Loudspeakers were generally used inside the bank and audience were seated in front of the counters turning a blind eye to the clients' needs during banking hours. Many clients were reported to have left the bank unattended because of the chaotic situation.

It is rather strange that the bank authority should have permitted them to hold such a meeting during office hours. In fact, the report that was submitted to the Finance Ministry by the Bank Reforms Committee headed by noted economist Dr Wahiduddin Mahmud recommended curbing trade union activities in nationalised commercial banks. The government cannot play a dual role so far as trade union activities in nationalised commercial banks are concerned. It was after many an embarrassing happening in this sector that the government finally decided to constitute a Reforms Committee. But the spirit behind one of its important recommendations has been thrown to the four winds.

# Clinton's Visit to South Asia : Goals and Attainments

*Notwithstanding some protest demonstrations by the generally left wing party supporters in Bangladesh and mainly right wing forces in India, the US Presidential visit to South Asia went off without untoward incidents. It achieved the limited objectives it had set before itself prior to its commencement.*

Presidential Bill Clinton's week-long visit to South Asia from 20 to 26 March represents a high water mark in US relations with Bangladesh and India and somewhat less with Pakistan. No American President ever set his foot on the soil of this region since President Jimmy Carter paid an official visit to India in 1978. Yet Clinton's trip can not be viewed merely as a tour de region in an uncharted area that casually fitted into the itinerary of a globe trotting President of the most powerful nation of the world. It represents a highly conscious, well-contemplated plan of action that became a part of the ever changing jigsaw puzzle of essential moves undertaken by the leader of a unipolar world. That South Asia has lately generated due interest and occupied a significant place in US strategic perceptions and in the world map drawn by her appears evident from the visit. Also, the personal desire of Bill Clinton to visit, for the first time, the Tajmahal-famed land of the Orient before the end of his final term as President may have been an important factor for his consideration.

The emphasis of US foreign policy on focusing world attention to the South Asian region has been vividly perceptible with the nuclearisation of the region. The explosion of nuclear devices by India and later by Pakistan undoubtedly caused great concern to the policy makers of the West, USA in particular. The concern arose not merely due to the negative development to their vigorous policy in favour of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons but also on account of their real or assumed fear of accidental, sudden or impulsive use of deadly weapons prompted more by emotion than reason. Another important factor rests with the continuing success of the US role as a peace broker in the Arab-Israeli conflict which allowed that country, in its role as international police, to pay greater attention to other trouble spots in the world. South Asia figured prominently in that scheme of thoughts.

The US President's visit to Bangladesh appeared to be almost an adjunct to his perception of significance for the region. But it was not entirely so. The famed Common Bank of Professor Muhammad Yunus and the commendable role it played, along with Fazle Hasan Abed's BRAC and other NGOs, in poverty alleviation caused genuine attraction for the President. Furthermore, wife Hillary and daughter Chelsea's account of their visit to

Bangladesh during the BNP regime of Khaleda Zia became an added factor to the President's decision-making process. The 11-hour visit to Bangladesh could have been better and more gracious had the government not insisted on inclusion of some party motivated programmes in President's schedule. The self-imposed

homage to the martyrs, still remained a mystery to the most. This was viewed in stark contrast to the visits of the President to many obscure places, including his participation in the Holi festival with village folks in India, and an unperturbed visit to Pakistan, lately more infested with terrorists and Bin Laden group.



## Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

invitation of the Prime Minister to the American Embassy and her presence during the distinguished visitor's call on the host President were not only in contravention of the normal protocol and usual practice but created embarrassment for all.

The security risk and the perceived threat on the person of the President which resulted in unfortunate cancellation of some out of Dhaka programmes, including visit to the national monument to pay

homage to the martyrs, still remained a mystery to the most. This was viewed in stark contrast to the visits of the President to many obscure places, including his participation in the Holi festival with village folks in India, and an unperturbed visit to Pakistan, lately more infested with terrorists and Bin Laden group.

However, during his visit to Bangladesh the President gained a first hand knowledge of the state of democracy, human rights and the socio-political-economic scenario in the country. However, he emphasized that Bangladesh was a land with promises, but the people have to avail of the opportunities. Despite conclusion of some agreements and giving some assurances, the widely speculated agreements on exploration of gas were not signed.

The long visit to India and short visit to Pakistan were undertaken to diffuse tension, create confidence building measures and avenues for dialogue between the two contending parties and help restore peace in the trouble-torn region. The task would have been less arduous, but for India's unhappiness

for the President to visit Pakistan and, perhaps, consequently to treat the military regime there in the same manner as the government of the largest democracy in the world. But Clinton's decision was, indeed, a sound one. Despite announcement of the pledge of holding some local elections by the military ruler on the eve of the Presidential visit, it did not tantamount to recognition or support for Pakistan's military government. The principal purpose of the visit was to ascertain for himself the present position in Pakistan, the future plan of action of the existing regime and, above all, to help create condition congenial for solution of its long standing dispute with India.

The US President's message to both Pakistan and India on the troubles emanating from the dispute on Kashmir was balanced.

sically similar. He was categorical in his statement that resort to force would not bring about a solution and must be averted. He advocated the merit for establishing dialogue between the two sides and to create conditions congenial for this purpose. Being aware of the hypersensitivity of India against a third party mediation, the President refrained from making any suggestion even to play the role of a facilitator. But he assured both sides of the readiness of the US government to provide any measure that will make a positive impact on the issue.

As for nuclear weapons and missiles, the President not only urged the two sides to exercise restraint and take necessary action against proliferation, but implored them to consider reduction of their nuclear armory. He did discuss the issue of CTBT, but under the prevailing situation did not nurture any hope of signing it by either party. The signing of the CTBT by Bangladesh earlier produced much satisfaction for the President.

Notwithstanding some protest demonstrations by the generally left wing party supporters in Bangladesh and mainly right wing forces in India, the US Presidential visit to South Asia went off without untoward incidents. It achieved the limited objectives it had set before itself prior to its commencement.

# Should Parliament Continue to Remain Ineffective?

by Mansoor Mamoon

*The sacrifices, trials and tribulations of the people for parliamentary democracy had been enormous. They have a stake in how it functions and cannot, therefore, afford to leave it as the domain of the two major political parties. Hence it is time for the civil society to act and act decisively to save parliament from being perpetually relegated into one party affair.*

AT the core of any democracy worth its name is the rule of law. How much right a citizen will enjoy and how the executive branch will govern a country are determined by a given set of laws, which, in their turn, are enacted by the legislature representing the masses. As all the people cannot be expected to equally participate in the process of law-making, therefore, requires a structure through which the representatives, freely chosen by the people, act on their behalf. This structured representation at the national level is called the legislature, the functions of which broadly comprise enactment of laws from time to time, ratification of the revenue and expenditure (budget) and to set a guideline for the proper governance of a country. To do so a political party requires the mandate of the electorate.

An effective legislature in a democratic set up, thus, performs two functions — viz to represent the masses and to play a watchdog role over the executive branch for appropriate checks and balances. For its supervisory functions to be meaningful it must have all the facts laid bare before it. Openness is the guiding principle of legislative business so that the people can understand what their representatives are doing and what their performances are. In a parliamentary democracy, parliament is said to be the centre-stage of all national activities.

Unfortunately for Bangladesh, the parliament was never allowed to play an effective and meaningful role since the country's very inception. The country's experiment in parliamentary practices was far from happy. No parliament from the first to the fourth could complete its full tenure. The fifth and the seventh parliament proved to be largely ineffective due to prolonged boycott by all the major opposition parties of the time. The Sixth Parliament, indeed, deserves a mention in the Guinness Book of Records for its unprecedentedly short existence! Lenin once said, "Parliament is the ornament of the bourgeoisie". In Bangladesh, indeed parliament has largely been relegated into a

mere showpiece. The country has, ironically, a parliamentary democracy sans an effective and meaningful parliament — a parliament that can truly claim to represent all segments of people — against continued boycott by the opposition political parties.

The culture of turning parliament into an ineffective nonfunctioning nonoperative body had its roots during the colonial days. The brutal murder of Deputy Speaker of the then Legislative Assembly of East Pakistan Mr Shahed Ali in 1958 over the passage of budget that triggered the subsequent proclamation of Martial Law by Ayub Khan, still haunts the nation with its nightmarish effect

Over a decade-long rule by military diktat, a sanguinary rule of independence and theocratic regime of General Ershad, the Parliament was reduced to a mere showpiece. The culture of pushing parliament into sideline persisted. The opposition parties resorted to boycott of parliament and the ruling party did not appear to be serious enough to bring them back. There had been agreements, negotiations and even mediation by the Commonwealth to end the stand off. The parliament was limping and the BNP which had received the mandate of about thirty-six per cent of the electorate in 1991 February polls superimposed its suzerainty by ignoring the representation of the vast majority of about sixty-five per cent of the people which went in favour of the opposition parties. Partisan attitude of the Speaker and provocation by the ruling party stalwarts both inside and outside parliament as well as the ineffectiveness of the parliamentary standing committees contrary to constitutional provisions in this regard, alleged to have compelled

the opposition to continue their boycott. The sixth parliament was a one-party affair and the most expensive one in terms of tolls of human lives as well as lavish expenditure from public exchequer. Its only task during its short-lived existence was to bring about the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution providing for general elections under non-party neutral caretaker government. It was the long-drawn demand of the combined opposition led by the Awami League, but when it was adopted by the sixth parliament there was ironically none from the opposition!

The seventh parliament saw the perpetration of what had exactly transpired in the Fifth Parliament and that too in its crudest form. This time it was the turn of the Awami League. The Speaker and the Deputy Speaker were blamed for what the opposition termed as their step-motherly attitude towards it. In the name of broadcasting and telecasting the parliament proceedings the ruling party applied what its called "Electronic Media Therapy" against the opposition. There were also largescale character assassination, mudslinging and endless polemics. The people were rudely jolted at the bad tastes and languages used by one side against the other in a free-wheeling manner with both the Speaker and Deputy Speaker remaining mute spectators to the verbal missiles derogatory to universally accepted parliamentary practices. Parliament is called the collective wisdom of the nation. Some of the performances of the members instead caused national shame and that too despite the much-publicised training of the members in parliamentary practices. As in the fifth parliament so also in the seventh, the ruling parties did not like the presence of a vociferous opposition apparently for fear of checks and balances

thereby negating the principles of accountability and transparency. The ruling party with less than thirty-eight per cent of the mandate it received in the June 1996 polls (plus certain small percentages bagged by Manzur Hossain of the Jatiya Party and A S M Abdur Rab, the lone member from the JSD) ejected the entire opposition with about sixty per cent of the popular support. The parliamentary standing committees seem to have no effective say over the functions of different ministries. These committees appear helpless as the ministries concerned very often ignore them.

It is said that habit die hard and the old habit of keeping the opposition at a safe distance and monopolising parliament has become the culture with the major parties. On the one hand this practice of turning parliament ineffective and not properly functioning is unrepresentative of all segments of the electorate and, on the other, against the accepted norm of parliamentary democracy. In such a dismal situation, parliament cannot claim itself to be 'House of the Nation' as the country's constitution would like to call it. Unless proper reforms are brought about in the existing parliamentary practices, the boycott syndrome is likely to continue in the future parliament also resulting in the eventual loss of public faith in the efficacy and working of parliamentary democracy in the country.

One of the measures suggested is to elect the Speaker from the ruling party and the Deputy Speaker from the opposition (and vice versa) as in India. The moment one is so elected he or she should formally resign from the party on whose ticket he or she has returned to parliament. This will, to some extent, ensure the neutrality and broad acceptability of the two guardians of parliament.

To relieve the steam off the central body of legislature, there should also be side mini-parliaments at the village council, union council, sub-district councils, district councils, municipal bodies and city corporations. One third of the seats (one hundred) should be kept reserved for women who will be directly elected on the basis of adult franchise (and not through indirect election) as stipulated in a bill tabled in the Lok Sabha (the lower house) in India recently. Vigorous bottom up democratic activities will ensure future leadership, ingrain democratic culture and ensure popular participation through devolution and decentralisation of power. All elections are also to be held over certain period of time under neutral caretaker government. The answer to less democracy is always injecting more democracy.

The sacrifices, trials and tribulations of the people for parliamentary democracy had been enormous. They have a stake in how it functions and cannot, therefore, afford to leave it as the domain of the two major political parties. Hence it is time for the civil society to act and act decisively to save parliament from being perpetually relegated into one party affair.

## To the Editor ...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

## "Plantation on road-dividers"

Sir, This letter is in reference to Mr M Zahidul Haque's response (DS: 02.03.2000) to my letter of 25.02.2000. Mr Haque agreed to some of my points but stood by his original suggestion of not planting big trees on road dividers. His logic behind this is twofold. First, the roots of trees may cause cracks on roads if they actually grow beyond the concrete road. Secondly, there will always be a risk of the tree to fall down because of its weak attachment to the ground.

I do agree with Mr Haque that if the road divider/Island is too narrow both the roots and the base of the growing stem may cause cracks in the divider itself (but not in the very road). If the City Corporation fail to provide the trees enough space to grow then the trees themselves will essentially make their room by the well known natural process of 'plant succession' and there is no harm in that. Even the slender trees would require about three feet wide road island containing loose soil so that nutrients can be properly used and the growing stem and roots can make their space.

The second 'logic' of Mr Haque, however, seems illogical to me because growing of roots

beyond the concrete road cannot mean weak attachment to the ground. So the risk of falling and causing 'serious accidents' cannot have any reasonable grounds. However plantation of 'big trees' like Banyan, Ashaullth (Peepul), Mango etc should be carefully avoided because these trees will require much space both in soil and in air. This point is specifically raised here to remind the City Corporation that it committed a gross mistake in planting a number of Banyan tree saplings on road-dividers. I myself have seen low such plants, one in Mirpur Road west to the Science Laboratory.

Mr Haque also suggested providing sprinklers irrigation of herbs and shrubs fortnightly to protect them from fading away by dusts. He cited example of such maintenance in the Cantonment area. But all the areas are not inside the Cantonment area. Furthermore, fortnightly sprinkler in busy areas will not serve the purpose, instead daily sprinkler will be needed. I think besides the Cantonment area and natural vegetation, only private property can have good maintenance of planted herbs and shrubs (even distant from road-hazards). The cause lies in the fact that such plants are weak and de-

pend on irrigation and fertilisation.

MAS Molla  
Member, BAAS, Dhaka.

## Dynasty rule

Sir, The people are getting disillusioned with alternate dynasty rules in Bangladesh. The public reaction might become acute in the days to come, judging by the pent-up feeling of frustration and despair in all spheres of life. The peoples' representatives are not serving the public interest, by keeping personal priorities at a higher level. Budding leaders should not support the 'umbrella effect', seeking protection under charisma of the past; as the people can see through the game.

The two Begums are apparently unable to deliver, and are accentuating the lingering effect on the suffering masses. Not to speak of politics, even day to day life has become miserable. The right personalities are not entering politics. We need a Mandela; therefore the rotten political environment has to be changed through public movement.

Internal democracy within the dynasty parties is missing, and the cumulative effect may burst suddenly, sweeping the debris. There must be room at the top for new entries.

The party leaders are cutting the branches in which they are sitting. Public support is volatile in the Begal society, who is ruled by the heart and sentimentalism; therefore it is unpredictable.

The nine-month wonder has been replaced by 29 years of bitter experience. We need

teams, which can emancipate and deliver. We have to get out of the vicious political circles and cycles. These are not revolutionary statements, but an outlet of frustration on poor leadership.

Alif Zabr  
Dhaka

## A President's visit

Sir, People were euphoric about the first ever visit of a President of the USA to Bangladesh and preparations were going on for a long time to receive him. Security measures had been taken with utmost care jointly by ours and America's security personnel.

But it is a matter of great disappointment and had hurt the feelings of our people that at the last moment President Clinton's programme of paying homage to the martyrs at the national mausoleum at Savar and a trip to Joytura had been cancelled due to security reasons.

We know that the American president is a very important person but we also expected this important person to act according to his early-announced programmes.

Nur Jahan  
Chittagong

## Whose responsibility is it, anyway?

Sir, One, on his way, will find that a bottleneck has been created by encroaching on the sidewalk of Service Road, (Sector-4, Ut-

tara, next to Dhaka-Mymensingh Highway), from Azampur Intersection towards south. Some have started a nursery of plants and few shanty stalls have also been erected on this public land. Some of the said stalls are even next to the Uttara Police Station. This bottleneck has created hazards for both the pedestrians and all the vehicle drivers, former for the encroached sidewalk and for latter, due to pouring pedestrians on this Service Road due to the encroachment.

Since, RAJUK has handed over roads etc to DCC, then such leasing of sidewalk should be known to DCC. Was this sidewalk made for said businesses or for the use of public (pedestrians and school children of 3-4 schools next to the said intersection)? Whose responsibility is then to stop one's business for the benefit of the rests? What responsibility on our duty policeman has when such shanty etc encroaching upon the public land/sidewalk, just next to Police Station? Would the responsible react accordingly?

A R Choudhury  
Uttara-Dhaka

## Is formal ceremony a child affair?

Sir, News item with photographs covering the formal introduction ceremony of MIG-29s in the BAF appeared in the DS (23 Mar), as well as in other

national dailies. The photographs showed our honourable PM in military uniform. All formalities of uniform (as meaning implies) have to be maintained by a wearer to ensure s/he is properly dressed. This is done, more meticulously in ceremonial events, to show our standard of perfection and discipline to guests, and through media, to rest of the world. Photographs showed, Jacket worn by PM remained unbuttoned. There shows a 'BAF Flying Badge' tacked in the PM's uniform. I never heard when our PM got this "highly professional badge" by qualifying necessary flying required or as an honorary laurel in a ceremony. Besides, PM instead of medals (like those seen in the Air Chief's Uniform), appropriate for a ceremonial occasion, pinned only ribbons used in a normal working dress. Has each medal, worn by PM, achieved in campaigns or PM participated? Ever heard when such ceremonial occasion, one has to wear all laurels/decorations those achieved in home and abroad. Our PM has many such laurels, besides the laurel of rank in the shoulder, like one the Air Chief worn, but all those are missing. Aren't these reflecting the level of perfection and discipline at our higher level?

I hope, those formulate military dress-regulation would clarify the norms, to remove public doubt, through our ISPR. What is our formal National Dress for a lady and Party Dress for the same of a political party?

An Observer  
Dhaka