

Positive Politics Will Be Win-Win for Opposition

THE question that is uppermost in the public mind at the moment revolves around the rationale behind the Opposition's continual boycott of the parliament. Should the budget session be of more than a month's duration as it is normally expected to be, and if the opposition were to abstain from it altogether they will court loss of parliament membership. This is because of their abstention going beyond the constitutionally-set limit of 90 consecutive days' sittings.

Now the Constitution enjoins upon the Election Commission to hold by-elections to the seats vacated by either loss of membership or by deliberate resignation of the opposition members. Of course, as the by-election process gets underway the opposition may think of using the one-sidedness of it to press for broad-based national elections. But the ruling party for its part gets a longer handle. It would get a walk-over in the by-elections and could even tinker with the Constitution. A whole series of imbalances are bound to occur in the national polity, let alone further political polarisation and exacerbation of confrontational politics in the country.

We do not see any logic behind the opposition's continuing absence from parliament. First of all, the national elections are fast approaching and the schedules for these have to be decided upon by the Election Commission in consultation with the political parties of the country. Moreover, radical electoral reform measures need to be adopted in the parliament before the general elections are held. A parliamentary discussion over the demand raised by the opposition that the national elections be held before the local body elections is also due.

We implore the opposition to go back to parliament, prevent the chaotic situation of by-elections and get on with the task of clearing the deck for national elections.

Their emphasis on preconditions is definitely overtaken by the latest compulsions in the political situation. As a matter of fact, even from the preconditions' point of view these would be best served if they demanded satisfaction on them from inside the parliament. If they are allowed time by the Speaker to express themselves on the floor of the House well and good, if not, then they can expose the Speaker to the public earning the latter's supportive nods. No place offers as good an opportunity to the opposition as the parliament to project themselves in an election year and expose the government for what it is worth. So, it is the parliament where they only have a win-win situation. Not outside it.

Banking Ethics

MUCH has been said, but little actually done, about the loan default culture that has virtually condemned the nationalised commercial banks to gasping. That a huge chunk of this loan is defaulted by a handful of people or business entities has been common knowledge. The ministry of finance and the Bangladesh Bank introduced quite a few regulatory measures to arrest the upward curve of classified loans and subsequently got back some of the money lent. However, there was no substantial change in the overall scenario. While the small borrowers were reportedly harassed, the big and known defaulters have had their loans repeatedly rescheduled, by courtesy of their political connections. This is also a common knowledge. Here again, very little has been done to snap the vicious cycle. What is really frightening is the fact that, as Professor Rehman Sobhan pointed out at Tuesday's lecture on Ethics in Banking, "a number of defaulters are now sitting in the parliament". So, now, not only they have influence on the bank boards and their management, but also they are in a position to influence legislation in this regard.

Transparency of transactions, although not really absent, is not religiously abided by. The fact that "41 per cent of all outstanding loans" are classified bears strong testimony to that effect. Indeed the banking system under-served the small borrowers, rural people and such key sectors as agriculture and small industry.

Basically, the loan default crisis boils down to two reasons: political cover lent to the defaulters and systemic inadequacy of public sector banking. The remedy, therefore, should be two-pronged. We are in total agreement with Professor Sobhan's suggestion for law reforms towards making the banking system transparent and accountable. However, as we have seen in other sectors, enactment or amendment of law means very little unless backed up by strong enforcement. Basically the loan default culture is a result of enforcement failure. If the authorities are unwilling to ensure enforcement, any legal measures would prove futile in the end.

Beastly Behaviour

THE 19th elections to the Barisal BM College Students Union were won by the ruling party student wing Bangladesh Chhatra League allegedly through fraudulent means, according to some reports. The female members of the BCL arranged a variety of programmes in celebration of the occasion, which drew the attention of a number of unruly youths and mastaans who scaled the boundary wall of the female hostel and tried to force open the locks of the main entrance to the dormitory. The girls students, scared to death, left the grounds and took shelter in the hostel, locked the gate and started shouting for help in the middle of the night. Neighbours gathered on hearing the hue and cry of the students but none dared to come forward to help them. The intruders caught hold of the guard of the hostel and manhandled him to get the keys. One of the newly elected leaders suddenly fell sick and had to be removed to hospital. The panic was widespread.

Barisal is not a big town but an important one no doubt. What was the police doing when the girls were crying for help at dead of night? Even in district towns mobile police patrol is common these days, yet no help was forthcoming. Do we understand that they were on leave in Barisal on that particular night? But why did not the assistant hostel super phone the nearest police station for help in the first place? These are some of the pertinent questions that have to be answered convincingly by the college authority and the police. Law and order have come to such a situation that anybody having political backing can hope to get away with anything.

IN the wake of widespread speculation in the political circle, the 4th budget session of the 7th Parliament commenced on the 5th instant without participation of the opposition political parties. The BNP did not attend the session of the Parliament not because it was a budget session. Their objection lay in the argument that the ruling party did not allow them to play opposition's legitimate role in the legislature and, in turn, made this important focal point of democracy into their party forum. The government vehemently denied the allegation.

One may wish to recount arguments of both sides in order to enable the readers to arrive at the conclusion of their own. Let us first take the reasonings advanced by the government. The ruling party contends that the Parliament is the highest body and the most appropriate forum where law-makers, applying their combined wisdom, frame legislation for the nation, provide guidance for good governance and promote all-round interests of the people.

The opposition parliamentarians, in furtherance of the interests of the people they represent, the party they belong to and in their own interest, must attend sessions of this august body, participate in its deliberations and promote the cause of democracy. They dismiss the opposition allegation that the latter was not allowed to raise or speak on the floors of the House on issues of grave national importance. Hon'ble Speaker furnished official statistics to prove that the opposition members, in fact, had spoken for a longer period on many issues than members of the government bench had done.

The ruling party emphasises that the opposition also bear

full responsibility of membership of parliament and are accountable for their activities or non-activities to the people who had elected legislators to represent them in the Parliament. People would expect their representatives to continue to break the barriers put up by the government party, if any, in order to protect and promote their interests and redress their grievances even in the most adverse situation. The ruling party noted that the opposition absentee members of the Parliament would automatically forfeit their seats after a consecutive absence of 90 days and may contemplate to extend the budget session, if needed, in order that the latter may lose all seats. Such a development, according to many, would enable the ruling party to hold opposition-free by-election to vacant seats, obtain maximum seats in the Parliament and modify the Constitution. Whatever may have been the real motive, the ruling party, on the other hand, has publicly and repeatedly asked the opposition to participate in the parliamentary session. A full House would ensure not only legal but moral legitimacy of their actions and allow people to witness a practicing democracy.

The opposition fully appreciates due significance and importance of the Parliament as one of the three pillars on which the edifice of democracy

Budget Session of Parliament

Why BNP is Reluctant to Attend?

The oft-repeated and total commitment to democracy and development by both the ruling and the opposition parties raised hopes in the minds of people, both at home and abroad, that a stable condition congenial for flourishing norms of democracy and productive economic activities would be established. Some even aspired to see the evolution of a two-party democratic system in Bangladesh. But their hopes got shattered.

is founded. The BNP Chairperson had pledged, from the very beginning of the present parliament, not only to participate in it but also to cooperate fully with the ruling party with a view to giving democracy a befitting institutional framework. But their principal disappointment lay in the fact that the ruling party's obduracy did not allow the opposition to play its legitimate role. This important symbol of democracy was made into an undemocratic forum.

place the draft Treaties at the Parliament before signing and depriving the Parliamentarians, both from the government and the opposition, of deliberation and counselling. They also arrogantly ignored country-wide demand from all quarters to elicit public opinion. The already concluded agreements were later placed in the Parliament and bulldozed into ratification.

On many occasions, opposition leaders and members were denied the privilege of raising highly important national issues and current incidents in the House. They were even gagged while speaking by way of disconnecting microphone from the Chair, Prime Minister and Ministers vilified the persons of the BNP Chairperson and other leaders in most unparliamentary language, to say the least. The Deputy Leader was made to resume his seat by the insistence of the Leader of the House herself and was not allowed to defend himself over a serious allegation against his person, overruling the decision

of the Speaker. The question hour of the Prime Minister was used mostly to propagate achievements of the government, ignoring serious questions from the opposition. No adjournment motion was allowed during the entire duration of the present Parliament. Two agreements were concluded at the behest of the Speaker between the ruling party and the opposition, setting out conditions for return of opposition MPs from their walk-out. But these conditions are yet to be fulfilled. The recent letter of the Speaker addressed to the Leader of the Opposition did not contain any pledge for fulfilment of these conditions nor to meet any other demands made by the Opposition.

Even the latest statement made by the Speaker, the BNP claimed, sought to hoodwink people by furnishing incomplete information. The Speaker stated that in the last three and a half years during the 13 sessions the BNP members were allowed to speak for a total of 366 hours, without disclosing the number of hours used by the Treasury bench and its loyal so-called opposition parties which in 287 working days must have been several times more than the time allotted to the opposition. He also furnished table to suggest that the opposition spoke longer than the ruling party on eight occasions or issues which totalled a mere six

hours in almost a four-year period. The situation, as it appears now, is complex and makes people, both indigenous and foreign, unhappy. The representatives of many foreign countries who are genuinely friendly to the people of Bangladesh are sad and did not hide their disappointment. Many of them expressed their inability to comprehend how Bangladesh being a homogeneous entity and endowed with a common language to bind people together would suffer so much due to divisive bickering on the political front.

The oft-repeated and total commitment to democracy and development by both the ruling and the opposition parties raised hopes in the minds of people, both at home and abroad, that a stable condition congenial for flourishing norms of democracy and productive economic activities would be established. Some even aspired to see the evolution of a two-party democratic system in Bangladesh. But their hopes got shattered.

Despite the present untoward circumstances, they feel that democracy warrants opposition to reconsider its stand in favour of participation in the Parliamentary session. To attain this, the primary initiative lies with the government, which must reiterate its earlier pledges to meet the opposition demands. BNP, on its part, may also give another try to see how the Treasury Bench behaves. As a result, the fast growing politically conscious people will be able to judge both sides and derive their own conclusion in order to make up their minds for the next poll.

The author, a former Ambassador, is a member of BNP's Advisory Council.



Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

Story of Missed Targets

Truth about Our Science

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

The most important such chain is the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), with 40 institutes and a budget exceeding Rs 970 crore. In January 1996, it set the ambitious goal of transforming itself into a "CSIR Inc". . . Now, nine months before the deadline, these targets look impossible. The current external resource generation is only Rs 240 crore, barely a third of the target for next year.

AS we hear the hype following the Clinton visit about India having joined the United States in the "front" of the new "knowledge revolution", it is time to take a look at the real state of our science and technology (S&T). Even a first glimpse is pretty sobering. India may have done well in a few limited areas, but S&T as a whole, is in decline. India's rank in world scientific output—measured by the Science Citation Index composed of publications in standard references—has fallen from eight in the early 1980s to 13 now.

In 1998, India's share in global scientific output was .36 per cent lower than it was in the early 1980s. Indian science annual output peaked in 1981 with about 13,000 papers in SCI-covered journals. This has since fallen to about 12,000 papers out of a global total which has itself risen from 4 lakh to 7.6 lakh annually. India's world ranking in citation impact (the number of times a paper is counted or cited by others) has fallen from 81 to 57, one of the lowest scores ever for a Third World country. This reflects poorly on both quantity and quality of our science.

This may be partly explained by the removal of some 30 out of 40 Indian journals from the SCI—partly reflecting reasons like the falling quality of Indian science and Western prejudice against Third World publications. But this prejudice fails to hamper other Southern countries. Even with these publications, India's overall rank improves from 13 to 12. According to UNESCO, India is one of the three regions (including Sub-Saharan Africa)

which experienced such a decline from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s. Simultaneously, China and Southeast Asia increased their shares of world science output by two-and-a-half and three times respectively.

In qualitative terms too, Indian science is declining. The relative citation rate (the ratio of observed to expected citations) for Indian publications is lower than the ratio for Mexico, South Africa, Taiwan, Thailand, even Kenya. In fields where India traditionally enjoyed a high score, there is a downward slope.

Indian science is in poor shape, missing the targets set by our administrative structures and chains of laboratories. The most important such chain is the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), with 40 institutes and a budget exceeding Rs. 970 crores. In January 1996, under Director General RA Mashelkar, it set the ambitious goal of transforming itself into a "CSIR Inc".

This included generating Rs. 700 crores annually from external sources, at least half from industrial customers, generating 450 new foreign patents a year; meeting a tenth of the Council's operating expenditure from intellectual property rights (IPR) licensing fees; and earning \$40 million annually from overseas through R&D. Now, nine months before the deadline, these targets look impossible. The current external resource generation is only Rs 240 crores, barely a third of the target for next year. The new foreign patents are just 200 and unlikely to increase much. And only Rs 96 crores was raised

from industrial customers. Foreign R&D earnings was just \$5 million. Worse, a mere five per cent of the IPR earnings target has been achieved.

The CSIR projected itself as the core of an emerging "global R&D platform". In reality, it remains bureaucratically hamstrung. Dr Mashelkar has derecognised all associations of scientific workers—cornering and demoralising scientists.

No Indian laboratory or institute has emerged as a significant "global R&D platform". Effective funding for S&T collaboration between India and the US in the public sector is only about Rs. 4 crore a year—a drop in the Rs. 9,000 crore-plus S&T funding ocean.

There are other poor performances. The Indian Council of Agriculture and Research has seen its share of new seeds development and research output decline. In institutions funded by the Department of Biotechnology, there is sobering realisation that "mission mode" targets for new vaccines and diagnostics may actually be difficult to achieve.

Most Indian Council of Medical Research institutions remain afflicted with poorly designed and unethically conducted experiments and practices. Under a cruel funding squeeze from neo-liberal policies since the 1990s, the universities are faring worse than specialised laboratories.

There are many reasons for this: "brain drain," inappropriate research priorities, physical ageing of established researchers, inadequate funding, falling per capita research and development (R&D) spending; and perhaps most important,

problems with the working environment and growing bureaucratisation of our science institutions.

Some of these problems, e.g. "brain drain" and a lack of interest in R&D in private corporations are long-standing. One consequence of the neo-liberal "free market" policies of the past decade has been unbridled freedom for companies to import technology packages, coupled with a lifting of ceilings on royalty payments. This has removed the R&D incentive for domestic industry. Similarly, most of our laboratories have been run in too despotic a fashion to enthuse young researchers.

However, some new and dangerous trends are in evidence today. Transparency in selecting top positions in the best of our S&T institutions is eroding. The recent selection of the director of one of our few world-class establishments, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, has come under a cloud—for the first time ever. Even the S.S. Bhatnagar award for scientists under 45 has lost some of its shine because of the high degree of nepotism and favouritism involved.

Our S&T has been heavily militarised. Today, just three departments of the Central government (atomic energy, space and defence research) account for 71 per cent of all Central S&T spending. The budget for atomic energy alone exceeds the combined spending of CSIR and ICAR put together. Scientists who work on defence-related projects are being given special pay. This devalues socially relevant science. None of this augurs well for India.

Cricket Spills off a (Fever) Pitch!

by A Maher

THE much-vaunted Asia Cup got off to a dripping start in the cricket-crazy city of Dhaka with dew drops lingering in more places than just the pitch. When the host nation were hammered out of the 4-nation tourney last Friday its supporters were in a mid-pitch muck up of their own. It was a conflict of emotions, whether to take salvation in a good performance with the greats of world cricket or indulge in an exercise of learned helplessness. This latter activity is, probably what the Bangladesh cricket team went through from the start of the event. And it culminated in the Bangladesh captain droning out in post-match shock, to a question from Ravi Shastri on the performance of the bowlers (against Pakistan).

"Yes...I think our bowlers bowled OK. Our batting did not click."

Well, the former was sent on a leather hunt for 320 runs and the latter sent packing for 87. A fitting incident to start a war of words among the 130 million who reeled with the eleven players. They had a lot to say no doubt, varying from purely raging tongues to septuagenarian sage on how the ifs and would-haves could have led the team to less harsher fortunes.

The national mentality to share sorrow was well preserved in this case too. India, this time around, were ironically on the receiving end. One informed cricket fan who also had some

Indian inclination attempted to quash Bangladesh with the Indian failure over their arch rivals Pakistan.

"The Indian bowling was like Bangladesh's own in the Indo-Pak match. So it was no wonder Bangladesh could muster up a 'respectable' 249 against India."

Oops! Maybe we are clouding a true effort of gritty batsmanship. An Indian reporter's slip of the pen for a keystroke, more likely) also added to the hodge-podge when our Test-contenders were accused of playing a fixed match. Even though the furor spread to our ministerial level, one journalist colleague in the office probably ended it the best.

"Every match has to be fixed—because if you don't fix a match, how would you play one?"

Our more seasoned journalists are likely to have some right to vent their decaying expectations on the present players of the national teams. It seems their performances (and even physical intricacies of their gait) remind them of the yesteryears and activate dormant memory modules to help flow the all-too-established "back in our times" aphorism. We first started, then swallowed when one senior member of an editorial board lapsed into a fearful suggestion on making a dreamy comeback at 65.

Cricket has reached fever pitch no doubt.



To the Editor ...

Excessive publicity and expectations

Sir, Our respected PM may be advised to cut down her numerous outdoor engagements, and curb the human weakness for participating in too many opening and anniversary ceremonies on trivial issues, which could be better left to other dignitaries (as pointed out in a letter in DS June 1). The politicians should not usurp all the openings; some slots may be left for the professionals and bureaucrats; and the private sector should not be forgotten.

It is a wonder how the PM manages to get enough time to go through the numerous files and reading material (a top leader needs a huge daily input, so that the processing and the outputs should be correct).

If I recall correctly, I read in the Memoirs of the late General de Gaulle and Malraux's Antimemoirs that de Gaulle used to conduct only one press conference in a year, and met a minister individually only once in a week by appointment, as he preferred to be alone to think about the resurrection of France.

It is natural for the sycophants to take advantage of the

PM's generosity, and prevent her from having some rest period, which she badly needs during her hectic daily schedules. What is more important is teamwork and coordination, which can speed up the pace of the daily government activities.

Why her physical presence is required at so many places? It appears that in the LDCs, the numerous followers make too many demands of their leaders.

Another humble suggestion is that she may consider shifting away from the blistering political attacks, and concentrate on the philosophy of approach to more broad aspects of national issues facing the emerging nation; because, if the approach were correct, the details would take of itself (that is the job of the professionals).

Clarification

Sir, I am highly surprised to see a report published on 4 June 2000 which made totally misleading statement in my name. It was a report on a roundtable discussion on drug pricing held at the National Press Club. It quoted me as, "We should see drug as a product and not merely as drug. And in the context of global open-market system we should de-regulate prices of drugs and give the pharmaceutical companies scope to practice free market."

It is not possible to reproduce my whole discussion here. But I want to mention the essence of my discussion. That is as follows:

"Approach towards drug pricing or drug supply completely depends upon our approach towards the health system. Health service is not a matter of privilege but a fundamental right. And therefore drug should not be considered as a commodity like any other commodity produced for merely profit. Health service and drugs should be made available as public good. In Bangladesh health is a 40 billion taka business where only ten pharmaceutical companies control more than 70 per cent of drugs, while more than 80 per cent people in this country are deprived of even getting minimum health care. The governments in this country have been consistently proved that they are not at all concerned about public health. Deregulation is usually justified in the name of free market economy. But globally free market is not in fact free, it is highly controlled by some giant MNCs, who make superprofit on drug business like any other business. So basic premises of free market economy do not work in the real world. Health service and drug should neither be a matter of private business nor a NGO project. It should develop as social and state responsibility."

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Our reply: We regret the misrepresentation of the writer's views.

Over-exposure in the media is self-defeating, due to the natural adverse reaction after some time. A person's good performance is the best advertisement in the long run. There is another weakness of the PM's teammates which needs to be curbed: she and Bangabandhu are named frequently and incessantly in a single day in all the speeches. Praise should not become a caricature!

A Senior Citizen
Dhaka

Regulate the private schools

Sir, Attention of the Education Minister is drawn to the letter in the DS of June 1, on excessive work load (homework) on the pupils and the guardians, in spite of paying a couple of thousand taka per month to these business centers masquerading as centers of excellent education. So far the Educational Code has not yet been published by the government, for the guidance of the management and the guardians.

Why the overworked parents

have to sit with the children at home after school hours sorting out piles of excessive homework, more than a child can handle independently at one sitting in the evening? When I was in the school (decades ago), I never felt the need of a house tutor or tutorial centre, and never bothered my parents (my father was in the Education Service) with home work; and still maintained a place amongst the top three in the class all the years.

The sham schools in the private sector and the tutorial centers should be under strict and regular inspection, and the annual review by the Parliamentary Standing Committee (PSC) may be published for public guidance (at present are the annual reports being published by any PSC?). The strength of the regulatory personnel may be increased to cope with the fast development of education in the country (the HR data may be published for analysis). The problem is the government is unable to run the ROUTINE services, not to talk about development activities.

A MA
Dhaka