

Why Turn a Good Decision into Farce?

THE Opposition led by Bangladesh Nationalist Party have decided to join the Jatiya Sangsads session 'for a few minutes' to circumvent the 90-day absence clause in a bid to save their membership of parliament. We commend the combined opposition's anxiety to retain their seats in the parliament which is positively reflective of an anticipated sense of loss they found too much to put up with. At the same time we demur at the technical or tactical by-pass being contrived to attend the session for a while, sign the attendance register and thus obviate the invalidation of their parliament membership. But have they realised who are they applying their tactic against? The answer is, more than the ruling party it sadly befalls the people at large and their 34 per cent vote-bank in particular.

This is the point we stressed in so many words through our editorial on Saturday and particularly through our frontpage commentary on the following day. Today we underscore it in the knowledge that the opposition has since taken a decision not to throw away their membership of parliament.

Since they value their membership of the JS people do expect them to go the whole hog living up to the full responsibility and obligation of the position they are so keen on keeping. When barely a year or so is left to the JS' life before the next general election takes place what is the point in lapsing into a boycott groove when pressing electoral issues need to be taken up by the opposition on the floor of the House itself?

A good decision has been taken by the opposition but evidently it does not go far enough. To prize JS membership ought to mean valuing the parliament itself. In other words, the opposition has to be unfailingly present in the JS to voice the concerns of the people, speak for the voters and speak for democracy. If you don't do so, the people are likely to understand that all you are interested in is to enjoy the perks and privileges of parliament members.

Unrest in Society Reflected

HAT 26 people were beaten to death last month alone could be ascribed to growing frustration amongst the public over the government's inability to arrest the alarming law and order downside. Tormented by seemingly perpetual proliferation of crime and infuriating indifference of the police force to the phenomenon, common people may have been pushed to the end of their tethers. Of course, that doesn't justify the growing tendency to take the law into one's own hands. Lynching cannot be condoned, no matter how disappointed one might have been over poor law enforcement.

Latest figures on people beaten to death, in our view, point to something more scary, especially when one takes into account the fact that the victims include a minor child, a schoolboy, a schoolgirl and an aged man. The circumstances that brought about their death also have more grievous implication than growing popular dismay over law and order. The societal psyche, it seems, has undergone a morbid metamorphosis. Otherwise how does one explain the death of Bayezid in the hands of senior inmates of a residential school? Or, that of Asir Uddin, who was beaten to death by some neighbours for rebuking them for teasing his daughter? Or, that of five-year-old domestic hand Roshana, who was tortured and left to die in a dustbin by her employers. The moral fabric of the society is fast disintegrating.

The prime reason for such a demoralising state of affairs is years of misgovernance, eating into each and every institution. Corruption, nepotism, favouritism, mismanagement, etc in the state apparatus have had a detrimental effect on the social behaviour pattern, eventually rendering it perverse in many respects. Gradually, such a process tells on the humane qualities and cruelty prevails.

Responsibility to bring back sanity, therefore, rests on the state. It has to restore public faith and trust in various institutions. The police, in this regard, should be able to play its crucial role, for they are in direct and constant contact with the people. Effective and, more importantly, caring law enforcers could surely do the trick. As the law and order improve and the people start feeling safe and secure, lynching impulses would automatically die down yielding place to an orderly behaviour.

NSC's Spendings

HE Government audit of the accounts of National Sports Council (NSC) for the period 1995-99 has made some startling revelations. Serious irregularities have been detected in the spending of around Tk 17 crore under different heads during the period in question. A leading Bangla daily in a report on Thursday last alleged violation of government rules and regulations in the expenditure of this huge amount. The officers of NSC purportedly did not cooperate with the audit party and even failed to respond to the preliminary audit queries. Officially the auditors were informed of as many as 33 bank accounts being held by the NSC but on final auditing 33 more bank accounts were unearthed by the audit party. There are a number of cases of gross irregularities detected by the auditors. The audit objections included paying salary to certain employees twice in a month, ghost salary bills, expenditure in excess of allocation, bank withdrawal and misappropriation etc. There were discrepancies in paying commission to parties for the 10th and 11th national sports lotteries also.

It seems that in the name of improving the standards of sports in the country a certain section of officials at the NSC has been busy improving their own lot by fraudulently grabbing public money. We strongly feel that the findings of the audit party need to be acted upon and the responsible made to refund public money and be dealt with severely according to the laws of the land.

FOREIGN Minister Jaswant Singh's overdue visit to Colombo must be seen against the backdrop of both dissonances within the NDA over Sri Lanka and the killing of industries minister C.V. Gooneratne on War Heroes' Day near Colombo.

Through the assassination, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has once again demonstrated its consummate mastery of the only kind of politics it knows besides blind nationalism: the Politics of Assassination.

Colombo has since hardened its military stance. The LTTE today faces an impasse against the now-reinforced Sri Lanka Army (SLA), with no clear signs of an easy victory. It is a sign of its desperation and its devotion to violence that it should have returned to its annihilationist strategy.

Ms Chandrika Kumaratunga's government clearly told Mr Singh that India should not today talk of a cessation of hostilities, that can only help the LTTE. At the same time, it is keen to pursue the devolution agenda irrespective of the LTTE. Mr Singh has done well to pay heed to Colombo's concerns.

In any case, even if they manage to capture Jaffna the Tigers' victory may prove hollow. A unilateral declaration of independence is un-

Only a Modest Role for India

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

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likely to win much support from the international community, which feels revolted by their methods. The LTTE is probably the world's most ruthlessly militaristic, Pol Potist, guerrilla force. It is remarkably well funded with whole businesses such as shipping.

The LTTE has practised terror not just against its Tamil "opponents", including Rajiv Gandhi, but against the moderate TULF and the EPRLF, PLOTE, and TELO. An Eelam under the LTTE is too frightening to contemplate.

There is a powerful case for the maximum devolution of powers to the Tamils in Sri Lanka's northeast, within a unified Sri Lanka, as part of an effort to rebuild a plural society. To Ms Kumaratunga's credit, she has thoughtfully formulated proposals for such devolution.

One can only hope that the present state of national distress will prove the futility of a purely military approach and

persuade all of Lanka's parties to discuss the proposals. The government can't afford to spend 20 per cent-plus GDP on the war or to impose harmful war levies. One can — more desperately — hope that the impasse in Jaffna, — and its tarnished international image, — will make the LTTE move towards a negotiated political solution.

Sri Lanka cries out for external mediation. So far, only Norway has played a limited role, one that is not very satisfactory for many Sri Lankans. Among the candidates for mediation being mentioned are the United Nations, the US, Britain and India.

The UN with its recent peace keeping performance inspires little confidence. The US's past record e.g., Palestine, makes it untrustworthy. We should beware of Big Power involvement too. Britain has serious leverage over the LTTE but shows little enthusiasm for mediation.

What of India? This is an

extraordinarily difficult question. The easy part is in rejecting any military role whatsoever. Military intervention can only lead to a bloody mess, stoke the fires of chauvinism and feed false pretences about India's "hegemonic" role in South Asia.

On the one hand, India cannot remain unaffected by what is happening in Lanka for obvious reasons: its own 50 million Tamils, the knock-on effects of the Lankan crisis, and potentially, a refugee influx. On the other hand, India bears a good share of the responsibility for the Sri Lanka mess—thanks to its disastrous role in the 1980s in arming and training the LTTE; imposing the 1987 accord; sending in the IPKF but betraying its promise to disarm the LTTE; and then withdrawing altogether.

India cannot be insensitive to the expectations that responsible streams of Sri Lankan opinion have from it; it should not be seen to be

"neutral" between Colombo and the LTTE.

Thus, says Kethesh Loganathan of the Centre for Political Alternatives in Colombo: "What is expected of India is a stabilising role that would, while preventing a total state failure" in Sri Lanka, ensure that the ethnic question is resolved in a manner that ensures shared sovereignty.

However, it is hard to imagine a non-interfering, fair, balanced, finely tuned role for Indian mediators, especially under the present dispensation. The BJP follows an aggressive Big Brother nationalism. And some of its allies are itching to put India's weight behind the Eelam agenda. They include not just committed LTTE supporters like the MDMK, but even the DMK with its ill-conceived "Czechoslovak solution."

It bears recalling that even Mr George Fernandes and Mr L K Advani have associated closely in the past with pro-Ee-

lam politicians, as this column has pointed out.

Under the circumstances, it is hard to envisage India as an "honest broker" in any overt process of negotiation. There is at best an indirect, low-key, non-interventionist, part that New Delhi could play, perhaps with Norway.

This can encourage the UNP as well as the ruling PA to take a positive approach to devolution within a loose federal framework, in nudging all towards the negotiable table, and tell LTTE that even military victory in Jaffna won't produce a legitimate state.

Such a role must be played with the utmost modesty, and with the full acknowledgment of India's past blunders. India must be prepared, indeed poised, to withdraw if there is a hint that it is as being heavy-handed.

Besides, India can offer to use its good offices with the UK to get it to pressure the LTTE by insisting it should not carry on activities on British soil that lead to the violation of international humanitarian law. But under no circumstances must India permit itself the delusion that it is "naturally" pre-eminent in the region, or that it should expand its role to pre-empt Pakistan or Big Power involvement. Grandiose self-delusion is infinitely worse than modest passivity.

Misguided Zeal

Ardeshir Cowasjee writes from Karachi

The six in charge of the country's education, with four women in the majority, get on well and form a competent team. They are keen to revise the curriculum . . . Cleaning up the curriculum is a must if there is to be any worthwhile education imparted to our citizens of the future.

"ALL bigotry is blind and stupid and savage. Sectarian bigotry is as bad as inter-religious bigotry. Bigotry stifles reason and the bigot in his frenzy is out to force all to believe what he believes."

This is what we were taught at school in Karachi not very long ago. But then our teacher was not a preacher. He was a Dastur Dastur, a Shams-ul-Ulema, a Ph.D. from Colombia (1908), and in 1929 was given an honorary D.Litt. from the same university when it celebrated its 175th anniversary and honoured its alumni. His name was Maneckji Nusserwanji Dhanaji. He died in May 1956.

To move on to what is being taught to the children of today in our government schools and colleges and to quote from a recent report entitled 'The Meaning of Education' written by Pervez Hoodbhoy, a member of the Education Advisory Board of the Federal Ministry of Education, an MIT man, who has managed to remain 'educated' in Pakistan: He teaches at the Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad and each year is invited to lecture at MIT and the University of Maryland:

"So what are the values currently being transmitted and communicated in Pakistan's schools? Obviously there is some variation across rich and poor schools, between villages and cities, and across provinces. But the basic roadmap is provided by the school curriculum. Lest there be any confusion the reader should know that, by an act of Parliament passed in 1976, there is one and only one allowed roadmap, prepared by the curriculum wing of the federal ministry of education, Government of Pakistan.

The usefulness of having a national curriculum was soon recognized by Gen Zia-ul-Haq. He is expected to — 1) discuss

in 1981 he decreed that henceforth Pakistani education was to be totally redefined and history rewritten according to his vision of Pakistan. From now on the struggle for Pakistan was no longer to be shown as a victorious struggle for a Muslim homeland. Instead, it was to be depicted as the movement for an Islamic state run according to Islamic law. Even if it conflicted with reality, the heroes of the Pakistan movement — Jinnah, Iqbal, Syed Ahmed Khan — were to be projected as Islamic heroes. Furthermore all subjects, including the sciences, were to be speedily Islamized."

Consider the impact of the national curriculum objectives on the mind of a 12-year old child in his last year at primary school. He is not taught to hope for a joyous future, a good life in a peace loving country in which goodwill towards man and the well being of its citizens prevails. The child is told that life is all about battling invisible enemies and that fear is to be feared.

The kindergarten to Class V curriculum adopted by the ministry of education in 1995 is, to say the least, a bizarre piece of work. At the completion of Class V the child has to be able to — 1) explain the importance of the work of past heroes of Pakistan; 2) identify the great personalities who contributed to the making of Pakistan; 3) demonstrate an appreciation for the work of Muslim heroes; 4) demonstrate respect and reverence for the founder of Pakistan; 5) demonstrate respect for the leaders of Pak-

istan.

How is a child meant to do all this? In fact, how can any sensible adult be expected to respect, lumped together, a group consisting of, inter alia, Ghulam Mohammed, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Zia-ul-Haq, Nawaz Sharif, Benazir Bhutto?

Amongst the objectives to be achieved is the ability to — 1) understand the Hindu and Muslim differences and the resultant need for Pakistan; 2) know all about India's evil designs against Pakistan; 3) acknowledge and identify forces that may be working against Pakistan; 4) demonstrate by actions a belief in the fear of Allah; 5) demonstrate the desire to preserve the ideology, integrity and security of Pakistan; 6) make speeches on jihad and shahada; 7) guard against rumor mongers who spread false news and to stage dramas signifying the evils of rumors; 8) understand the Kashmir problem; 9) collect pictures of policemen, soldiers and National Guards.

How can a child be expected to preserve ideology of Pakistan? And how on earth is a 12-year old expected to understand and know all about the "Kashmir problem"? As for the specifying, one is rendered speechless.

He must also know — 1) the place of Pakistan in world affairs; 2) the importance of the location of Pakistan in the world and specifically to other Islamic countries; 3) the role of the Defence Forces of Pakistan; 4) the functions of the Supreme Court of Pakistan; 5) the problems of Pakistan.

He is expected to — 1) discuss

electric load-shedding; 2) visit garbage dumps and police stations [presumably to define the basic differences between the two].

Now to quote from a textbook entitled 'Pakistan Studies' published by the government to be taught in Classes IX and X: "After the death of Aurangzeb Alamgir in 1707 AD his successors could not control the vast Moghul Empire and as a result South Asia gradually fell prey to the forces of anarchy." One reason given is "the spirit of holy struggle and war [Jihad] which was the fountainhead of power of Muslim kingdoms faded gradually. Thus the military power became weak. Ease and laziness blunted the military prowess."

For some unknown reason, when the story of Pakistan catches up with the 20th century and the 1980s, there is a lacuna as to the departure of Zia-ul-Haq from the national scene. "Unfortunately the Junjo government was dismissed on May 29 1988 after it remained in power for three years and two months. The National Assembly and the provincial assemblies were dissolved by the president. In November 1988, general elections were held on a party basis."

Discussing factors that lead to the high birth rate in Pakistan, the book teaches that the primary factor is the "hot climate of the country." And on the secession of East Pakistan, all that the book has to say is: "Bangladesh was separated from Pakistan and became an independent country in 1971."

Compulsory reading for BA,

the secondary level may be limited to a reasonable strength considering the requirement of educated manpower. There must be encouragement in the vocational training for all primary-level passed students particularly for those who are not qualified for admission in the secondary level and vocational education (or training, whatever we call it) must be 100 per cent free; it will give more privileges of employment at home and abroad. The school building, which is used for primary students, can also be used for secondary students in shifts. For example, primary schooling can be from 7am to 10am and from 11am to 2pm.

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There is need for creating public awareness on the weakness in our political culture. The politicians will not take the initiative to discuss their own shortcomings while the others will think about victimisation. The poor illiterate voters do not have the backbone to fight black money and power.

The national elections are due next year. How to attract the right type of potential leaders to stand by the people? Bad politics has driven away good (potential) politicians.

A citizen Dhaka

bug is heavy politicisation in almost every sector of public life, both in the public and the private sectors. The fear of victimisation inhibits genuine criticism. Misuse of power and influence is making the norms of the society abnormal.

How the captive critics hope to get out of this vicious circle? This abnormal situation is eroding the values of life handed down by the elder generation after generation. Higher education is missing its very objective, namely, the cultivation of the mind. The politicians never discourse on these core issues.

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A frustrated sufferer Dhaka

Coin-operated utility service

Sir, DESA's new remote-control electric metering system (DS, June 13) made impressive reading. Simultaneously, another pilot project may be tried, WITHOUT visible metering system, for hourly supply of domestic cooking gas, to start with, then go for the electric connections in small establishments and homes, as used in many industrialised countries. No meter, no meter reading, no bills, and the accounting is internal in the government's offices.

It will result in huge savings in time (man-hours): accounting (paperwork), billing and payment of bills by the consumers every month, the huge banking network, and millions

on payment trips to banks and payment centers. And no corruption, due to elimination (or decrease) of the human factor in the chain. Coin-operated system has been proved practically in many countries. The mint has to produce a lot of coins (one and five taka) for ample supply, to meet the demand (no problem checking counterfeits).

The UN agencies may be more than willing to assist in reducing the human system loss. The remote control electric metering system may work in the bulk-supply sector. The more the sophisticated network, the more the maintenance cost; and the LDCs are very weak in maintenance, depending hundred percent on foreign spares and know-how.

A citizen Dhaka

Poor show by Cadet Colleges

Sir, Referring to the analysis contained in the DS story 'Poor show by the Cadets' (DS, June 12), it may be mentioned that these Cadet Colleges started functioning during the Pakistan regime, based on certain educational philosophy applicable during the former decades. It is time for an in-depth review of this method of teaching, for discarding the weak points and strengthening the IT side to keep up with the changing mosaic and the national aspirations.

But so far this sector of education has not drawn either public attention, nor that of the lawmakers in the parliament. The average annual percentage of passes has been going down gradually. Therefore it is the right time for a high-level in-depth review of the whole system of this type of education: as previously no such report appears to have been released publicly.

Abul M Ahmad Dhaka