

Why Turn a Good Decision into Farce?

THE Opposition led by Bangladesh Nationalist Party have decided to join the Jatiya Sangsad 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 relapsing 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

THE 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. Goneratne 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 town the Tigers' victory may prove hollow. A unilateral declaration of independence is unlikely 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.

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Only a Modest Role for India

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

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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 desparately — 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 US 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 seen 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

Ardesheer 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.

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, Qbal, 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 joyful future, a good life in a peaceful 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 shahadat; 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 speechifying, 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 Junejo 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.

B.Com, MBBS, and B.Sc Engineering is another book entitled 'Pakistan Studies' which attempts to explain the ideology of Pakistan: 'What does Pakistan mean? It means there is no God but Allah.' Dr Ishtiaq Hussain Qureshi defines it further: 'Thus the Pakistan ideology is the guiding principle of the Muslim majority regions of the South Asian subcontinent for obtaining an ideal Muslim state. Pakistan which has been chosen as a keynote for passing life, both individually and collectively, according to the Islamic conception of life and for resurgence of Muslim society.'

In the year 2000, we finally have a government which acknowledges that education is a most vital sphere of national development: 'A comprehensive review of the education sector is in progress with the aim of identifying specific strategies and actions to ensure fundamental and purposeful improvements in every sector of this most vital sphere.'

The Chief Executive, General Pervez Musharraf, has chosen

well as far as his education ministers are concerned. Dr Zubeida Jaleel, the federal minister of education, is a liberal well-qualified woman, approved of by all our known and able educationists who in the past have had to cope with men such as Ghous Ali Shah, Professor Anita Ghulam Ali, the provincial minister in Sindh, has mobilized a team of twenty English-speaking university teachers and engaged them in rewriting the English text for the Sindh Textbook Board of books taught from Class I to Class XII. The minister in Punjab, Akhtar Saeed, is also reputed to be liberally educated as is the able and indefatigable literacy minister Shaheen Atiqur Rahman. In Balochistan, Dr Razia Babar is a Ph.D. in Geography, and in NWFP, we also have a liberal man in Imtiaz Gilani.

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 and with the generals, the mullahs, and the politicians busy elsewhere, they should be able to get on with the job undisturbed. Cleaning up the curriculum is a must if there is to be any worthwhile education imparted to our citizens of the future.

OPINION

Thoughts on Education

M Serajul Islam

The education system in Bangladesh needs to be reorganised and updated quickly to ensure sound academic stability. Ideally it should be bracketed into several stages as described below:

(a) A PRIMARY LEVEL up to class-VIII and which should be completely free of any financial implications, i.e. free of cost. It should follow a standard that enables a student with primary education to express anything written in his own mother tongue (Bengali). He must have knowledge of the basic instructions of Islam and the latest developments in agriculture, science and its use in the development of mankind. He must also know at least how to read and write in English and Arabic.

(b) Infrastructures necessary for all educational institutions must be fully financed from national budget, but maintenance cost are to be met from institution's own fund.

(c) There should be a SECONDARY LEVEL from classes-IX to XII and this should not be free. Now, a question will arise regarding who will bear the cost of education of poor students. In my opinion, the rich must pay the full cost of education for their children and poor students must be given interest-free loans to bear the cost of education. Every student must be enrolled in a school nearest to his residence. It will reduce the conveyance costs as well as traffic jams in big cities. The most important outcome of this is that the residents of the area will press the school management to keep the standard of their school high. They will take more to a school that is in their own area and their present and future generations will have no other option except to study in that school. Now, the rich who are also influential in any area of Dhaka or other big cities send their children to famous — or so called famous — schools whatever may be the distance or cost and the strange fact is that students residing at Uttara go to Diamond Road school and vice versa. So, naturally influential citizens do not bother to improve the school in front of their doorstep. At present 20 per cent of 8th grade students appear for scholarship examinations. This can be increased to 50 per cent or more. The number of seats as well as a minimum standard (which can be determined through a scholarship examination of class-VIII) at

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 11 am secondary schooling can start till the end of the day and the same building can be used for night schools or colleges reducing the infrastructure cost and, at the same time, giving less pressure on the national budget.

When the loan system to students starts to educate our children there is no necessity of opening of any more university with public financing. There shall be laws to recover the loans given to students from their employers. This is not a tough system to devise. With less cost, the state can educate more young men and women to their requirement and standard. I think everyone will agree that the initial setting of such system will involve more money and labour, but after a few years when loans given to students start to be realised, it will have a good impact on our economy.

(d) Our educational institutions will be more responsible and accountable, as their enrolled students will bear the cost. Student politics in educational institutions will automatically be rationalized regaining respect of people.

(e) 4-year DEGREE must be at par or even above the international standard. Poor nations like us cannot afford to produce below standard graduates who remain unemployed or end up as mastans.

(f) If children of Bangladesh study in a place other than Bangladesh, his or her right to vote and occupy any public post or Government service shall be strictly prohibited except in case of post graduate studies, or with foreign countries or international organisations who offer scholarships for studies and training.

The writer is a Superintending Engineer, PWD.

To the Editor...

Quality vs quantity

Sir, It was diverting to note from different dailies that several cabinet ministers banded together to support the new budget proposals, to deride the former Finance Minister (who brought in macro stability in the '90s).

Alas! Power lies in quality, not quantity or rhetoric. There is a difference between the state of the economy, and the economics of the state. The economy of life depends on both these factors.

AZ
Dhaka

National Budget

Sir, Hon'ble Finance Minister Mr SAMS Kibria has claimed to have given the treatment of an economist to the national budget of 2000-2001 and castigated ex-finance minister Mr Saifur Rahman for looking at the budget as an accountant. It needs no mention that the acumen Mr Rahman has shown and the excellent management he did as finance minister have till now remained unbeatable.

To be a successful finance man whether at state level or at level down it what is required of a man is the ability to understand the events taking place in economic field, visualise the future scenario and regulate the events taking place to the desired goal. A finance minister is country's manager of finance. There is a line, which demarcates academicians and theoreticians from managers, the doers. Late Mr Deng of China once said to hit his critics, 'The worth of a cat is in its ability in killing rats. It is immaterial whether it is black or white.' During the last days of General Ershad's regime country's economy reached such a precarious position that the finance minister of that time who had earlier served in senior positions of finance in government for a long time had to quit his position under pres-

sure and an engineer was placed in his place.

The critics of Mr Saifur Rahman should not forget it.

S M Haider Ali
Chittagong

Hijack in broad daylight!

Sir, A few months ago I was robbed of three lakh taka in front of ANZ Grindlays Bank. Soon after I got out of the bank and headed home in my car. I was surrounded by six motorbikes carrying twelve armed men. They held out guns and knives at me and took away the money. I did not file a case or inform the police fearing future conflict. Last week again, a friend of mine was robbed in a similar manner, at the same place. The only difference was that he carried ten-lakh taka with him. He too was afraid to seek help from the police. How long do we have to keep quiet? How long would it take to restore law and order in our state? When shall we be able to do business without the fear of being hijacked or killed? Is there anybody who can answer this query?

Frustrated sufferer
Dhaka

Political standard in formative stage

Sir, Our politicians are getting ruined due to too much undeserved adulation, and too little criticism, stray or relevant. The core criticism is lacking as the independent group known as the intellectuals of the society, are morally scared (most of them) of remaining independent and criticise all parties, regardless of the votes they cast secretly as voters during national elections.

This polarisation has resulted into a situation when the politicians do not take criticism seriously, and use unparliamentary and abusive language when brushing off even the genuine critics. The heavy

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.

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 frustrated taxpayer
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. Use coin-operated system for hourly supply of domestic cooking gas 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 supplier'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 counterfeiters). Why not for feasibility study? 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 sophisticated network, the more exacting is the invisible 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