

## Oh, These Wagging Tongues

ONLY if our Leaders would talk a little less. It would not perhaps be an exaggeration to say that most of our political problems spring not so much from ideological or policy differences as they do from overused tongues devoid of either any sense of proportion or of time, place or usefulness. Our leaders are so much in love with their own voices that they have no time to listen, discern, interpret, analyse and understand what others are saying. In fact they love to speak so much that they don't even have time to think what are the likely implications of what they are saying. These observations are true for the leaders on both sides of the aisle.

Imagine our politics if people like Zillur Rahman, Tofail Ahmed, Sajeda Chowdhury, Md. Nasim — to name the most talkative of the lot from the AL side — and of course Sheikh Hasina herself would have exercised some restraint on their utterances. Imagine similarly what would have happened if people like Prof. Badruddoza Chowdhury, Mannan Bhuiyan, Nazmul Huda, and of course Khaleda Zia herself talked less and with some understanding of the implication of what they were saying. Examine, for instance, how some splendid opportunities for political dialogue were lost due to irresponsible tongue wagging.

Much to everybody's surprise Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina wrote two successive letters to her opposition counterpart inviting her to a discussion to select a new CEC. Yes, there were plenty of flaws in the way the PM did things — and this paper did criticise her for that — but no one can deny the fact that at least she took an initiative that did create an opening which could have been built upon if there was goodwill on the other side. When a second channel of negotiations was being examined through the Kibria-Saifur route the BNP chief destroyed the whole process by declaring that she would talk about the appointment of the new CEC only with a caretaker government, and not with the AL. With that meaningless and absurd statement an opening was closed and whatever little chance there was for a dialogue was lost.

Take the more recent case from the opposite side. Instead of resigning or allowing their seats to lapse through continuous absence of 90 days, the opposition came to the parliament to save their membership. We think it was a responsible thing to do. It was far better than resigning and throwing our politics into more uncertainties. This saving of seats at least keeps open the possibility of a solution and opposition's chance, however remote, to return to the House. But how did the ruling party react to it? With taunts and insulting remarks that it was all done to save their perks, privileges and the coveted 'red' passports. The BNP Chief in her brief speech gave definite indication that her party would return if proper atmosphere was created. To a five-minute speech the PM gave a 35-minute reply and destroyed whatever opening there was of some sort of political understanding. Just little less talks would probably have done the trick. Oh, these wagging tongues are diminishing our stature as a nation, and our sense of decency as a people.

## Standing Committees Show the Way

THE standing committees on different ministries have indeed been a refreshing relief in an otherwise bleak parliamentary scene over the last one year or so. With any effective and efficient functioning of the Jatiya Sangsad remaining a far cry due to the opposition boycott, these bodies have been unfailing in their watchdog role vis-à-vis the government's performance. Standing Committee meetings have been convened at reasonably regular intervals, and useful reports and recommendations were put forth by them to the parliament. Partisan bickering has not been much of a hindrance to convergence of opinion on some crucial matters. Endorsement of two proposed amendments to the Government Primary School Teachers' Welfare Trust Ordinance of 1985 by the standing committee on education ministry at its recent meeting is a case in point here. In our view, the way the members on different JS bodies have kept the values of parliamentary system of governance close to their hearts in the testiest of times stands out for all lawmakers to emulate.

Exactly after eleven months and seventeen days of a self-imposed exile, the opposition members rejoined the JS on Monday, albeit for a short period, sparing the nation of a political crisis of a graver magnitude. The prospect of mass by-elections to 129 seats in case of nullification of opposition membership on grounds of continuous abstention from the parliament for 90 days was too grim for anybody's comfort. By snapping the prolonged streak of absence, the legislators have opened a tiny window of hope. Although they appear adamant in the wake of the PM's speech in the JS to abstain from the session 'until a congenial atmosphere is restored in the House, we think there is an opportunity to steer the parliament out of dead waters.'

Parliament is the bedrock of functional democracy and facilitating its operations is a sacred responsibility for each and every member. On that count, we believe, both the treasury and the opposition benches have failed to rise to their respective responsibilities. Still, we believe, all is not lost yet and the opposition's decision to protect their membership has opened up an opportunity to restore some sanity in national politics. The JS committees have shown that ruling and opposition lawmakers can reach consensus on crucial issues. We see no reason why the members wouldn't be able to work together in the parliament.

## AL's Four-year Rule: A Brief Assessment

*Never in the history of Bangladesh, people, both rural and urban, have suffered so much from the right of insecurity as they have been subjected to at present. According to the report published in a pro-establishment newspaper on the 20th instant, everyday on an average 10 persons are being killed and eight women raped in the country; the rate of robbery, extortion, abduction and other crimes have also increased proportionately.*

THE present Awami League government completed its four-year rule on June 23, 2000. There is fanfare on the part of the government, extolling its virtues and praising its achievements in many fields. The opposition political parties, on the other hand, also appear happy at what they call total failure of the ruling party to provide good governance, but they are simultaneously angry at the continued repression of the government on opposition leaders and workers. The people in general, in their turn, are dismayed at the protracted bickering among political parties and are disillusioned at the uncertain future stored for them.

There are many ways of assessing a situation about which claims and counterclaims are lodged and these need to be judged on their merit. The mere enormity of such an endeavour precludes a comprehensive exercise within the limited fold of this article. The task, however, can be performed by way of portraying vivid pictures of the situation that immediately come to one's mind. Before it is done, one may compare the major pledges made by the Awami League before election and the extent to which these pledges have been redeemed so far. One of the important programs incorporated in the party manifesto was separation of the judiciary from the executive. 4 years have elapsed of the Awami rule, but no action even interest has been evinced in this direction. On the contrary, tighter control of the lower judiciary by the administration has no longer remained a secret. Even the higher judiciary has not been spared publicly expressed anger and intimidation of Awami Leaders and the Chief

Executive had to be officially reprimanded by the Chief Justice for improper remarks. Another important pledge to grant autonomy of the state-run electronic media appears to have been completely forgotten. Nay, the radio and television have been turned into government mouthpiece and free propaganda machinery for the ruling party. The report prepared by a high level Commission set up for this purpose has been lying in waste paper basket for over two years. But why? No answer comes from the government.

The most important pledge made in the election manifesto was repeal of all Black Laws. The Prime Minister immediately on assumption of power declared that the first and foremost priority of the government lay in the restoration of law and order. She defended the Special Powers Act of 1974 as an instrument indispensable for ruling the nation. If the Special Powers Act was not a Black Law, what could be, one wondered. That too the Awami League government showed by way of enacting a blacker than the Black Law, the Public Safety Act 2000. The prime issue that agitates people's mind, no doubt, relates to the law and order situation. The government showed miserable failure on this domain.

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to at present. According to the report published in a pro-establishment newspaper on the 20th instant, everyday on an average 10 persons are being killed and eight women raped in the country; the rate of robbery, extortion, abduction and other crimes have also increased proportionately. The Home Minister himself expressed deep concern about it.

It is true that combing of criminals, who have generally been associated with the ruling party of the day, has netted

supporters away from his kingdom. Not only Awami League Ministers, MPs and other leaders but also their sons and relatives have been reportedly involved in killing, extortion, illegal occupation and other crimes, enjoying protection from the administration, and are spreading terror throughout the country. The sudden armed attack by Awami storm troopers on Kader Siddiqui's meeting to float a new political party was reminiscent of Nazi Germany.

confidence of people in the ruling party.

The state of economy has been aptly described by reports profusely made by the World Bank and others prior to the development partners' meeting in Paris held in March last. The unhappiness expressed by the donors about lack of good governance and profusion of corruption made their financial pledge apparently conditional. The disputed rate of growth is inadequate and is liable to be eaten up by rising inflation and higher prices of essential goods. The current year's budget had to be balanced by way of heavy borrowing from commercial banks to the staggering figure of Taka 4000 crores. It is not unusual to do some borrowings from banks by the government, but the staggering figure as well as the continuing practice of substantial dependence on it exposes heavy financial mismanagement on the part of the government. The siphoning away of bank liquidity, besides political unrest and instability, posed a formidable barrier against establishment of industries by domestic entrepreneurs. Foreign investors have also generally shied away and made little investments, except in energy and telecommunication sectors. Goods from across the borders, both in official and unofficial channels, have made Bangladesh a virtual colony.

Progress in poverty alleviation programmes and im-



### Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

some notorious professional criminals in country's south-western region. But, all this good work has been offset by the so-called combing operation of opposition leaders and workers in Feni, while at the same time government party activists were allowed to roam about freely and boldly with weapons as confessed by their leader from the ruling party. That leader, who is commonly known as godfather, received blessings of the Home Minister sharing the same platform in a public meeting and subsequently reigned over the region, virtually driving all opposition

The by-elections held to fill up vacant parliamentary seats boycotted by the opposition are marked by gross irregularities, violence and intra-party feuds. The astonishing election defeat of the Awami renegade, the legendary freedom-fighter Bangabandhu Kader Siddiqui, from his home seat, Tangail, testifies to the extent to which the administration was coerced or cajoled to acquiesce in rigging. Defeat of the Awami League candidates in the hands of their rebellious relatives as witnessed in the by-elections in Pabna and Rajshahi proves loss of

## How Did AL Perform in the Last Four Years?

by Dr. Mozammel H. Khan

ON June 23, 2000 Awami League has completed its fourth year of governance. Since its inception more than half a century ago, it is for the first time that the party has governed for this duration and by all likelihood it will end its tenure on due time as dictated by the constitution. The question of how did it perform as a ruling party is very much a debatable issue in the judgement of both its patrons and detractors. The answer to this genuine question is difficult to be deduced with absolute objectivity and in unequivocal term. However, more dispersion would be reflected in the analysis if its performance is evaluated vis-à-vis that of its principal adversary.

The whole month of May I was in Bangladesh and toured both the urban and rural areas extensively to see and hear for myself the common people's perception about the current status of politics and economy of the country. Many of my observations would bear the reflection of what I have heard on the street and have perceived from my own interactions with the ordinary citizens of plural political beliefs.

All over the democratic world, the performance of a ruling party is evaluated against their election platform. The report card is based on their point by point accomplishment.

The end result, however, should be the expansion of economy, which is tied to all other merits of good governance. Even if they fulfil all their election pledges and the economy falters, then the economic policy of the government has to share the blame of imprudence. Unlike in many developing countries, although the government legislators frame the laws, the maintenance of them do not fall directly within their jurisdiction, since they do not control the police department. The canvas of government intervention is very wide in Bangladesh and as such it has to shoulder the blame of many nonperformances.

The law and order situation is probably the most talked about and the influencing subject in the lives of the people. The government success in this sector, particularly in the big cities, is far less than satisfactory. It was obvious that on many occasions the deterioration was due to partisan control of the law-enforcing organ of the state. The PM's words that 'the criminals and terrorists do not belong to any party' were not always commensurate with the actions of the law-enforcing agencies. One recent incident involving the PM's close relative showed clearly to the nation that there are several set of laws, one for her close relatives.

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People had more expectation from the second consecutive democratically elected parliament. However, just like the earlier, this one too has failed to meet their expectation. Lion's share of the onus may lie on the shoulder of the opposition lawmakers but the ruling party has to bear its own share of blame too. Their sincerity is not out of question in convincing the opposition lawmakers that they would be treated with due right and privileges, and their House deliberation would be relayed to the people undistorted. The ruling party had much to do in evaporating the suspicion of the neutrality of the Speaker. It was obvious that the Speaker on many occasions did not act as discreetly as expected from the moderator of a Westminster style parliament. If it were so, he, on his own,

has brightened the image of the country. As a chief executive of the government, Sheikh Hasina has outpaced any of her predecessors, including her legendary father, in securing international laurel and recognition. The country has, at last, come out of the negative image of a calamity-prone delta to a land of promising economy and steadfast democracy. Recent World Bank reports identifying Bangladesh as the eighth fastest growing economy of the world would give much solace to people as well as to the government. The four consecutive bumper harvests coupled with thousands of kilometres of new roads, bridges and culverts have evolved a massive rural infrastructure that created a vibrant rural economy. The country has attained self-sufficiency in food. The politics of Bangladesh evolves around the price of rice. From that perspective, the government has scored a victory.

In the political front, from one perspective, the AL was blessed with a very imprudent opposition who did not play their flutes in tune with the people. Begum Zia while cultivated a very positive and controlled image as the PM, shattered that as the leader of the opposition. She behaved incoherently, at times desultory and desperate on many issues and

of the appointment of the CEC. In choosing between the CEC, people stand and that of her four-party alliance, she opted for the latter, which in the arithmetic of her advisors constitutes 60 per cent of the voters' support.

In the last four years, a lot of water has streamed through the rivers of the land, including the Ganges. The ruling party does have a lot of shortcomings in its rules. But can the BNP policy makers cite a single issue where their stand was able to attract common people to their fold? Moreover, any analysis of the Jatiya Party vote in the last election has to take care of the fact that, except for one district, lion's share of the JP vote was due to the candidates themselves, while the rest were partly anti-BNP and partly anti-AL votes. In addition, BNP is a big political party with more than one of its own candidates in every constituency. Any attempt to allocate any of the seats to the alliance partner may antagonise the party aspirants. The lone visible success of the BNP chief was the rehabilitation of a deposed autocrat. This rehabilitation, of course, has taken place exclusively at BNP's own expense, which its policy makers will realise, in concrete term, after the next general election.

Their recent move to join the parliament just to retain their membership does not help reinforce their image among the people. They were elected to do a job for the people, not to collect allowance and benefits without performing what is expected of them. What could be more preposterous than to suggest that the AL want to remove the provision of the caretaker administration from the constitution, when it was they who spearheaded the campaign for its inclusion? Were they elected only to prevent the alleged constitutional amendment and that too sitting outside the parliament?

In the words of The Daily Star leader, 'BNP returning to the parliament just to retain its seats is not only immoral but also self-defeating. There is a far greater purpose for which it should return and that is to reclaim its position as the nation's voice in the opposition'. As the largest opposition party in our parliament's history, people expected more proactive and responsible performance from the BNP. Termining the current budget 'anti-people and labelling the incumbent finance minister as 'incompetent' do not mean much to the people. They had the responsibility to

identify which provisions and policies would go against the interest of the people, which obviously they have fudged and that too, they should have delivered in the floor of that august body where they were elected to serve.

When accusing the government, the BNP chief even could not provide any credible fact or statistics in support of her accusation. Bringing the corruption charge against the PM in the recent MIC-29 purchase, the statistics given by the BNP chief was absolutely ludicrous. How can any one get a commission of Taka 600 crore in a purchase that involves only 570 crore? She claimed to have in her possession the documentary evidence in support her accusation. But when the PM challenged her to come out with the proof, she refrained silent.

I still believe, there are many in the BNP who were guided by their ideological convictions to participate in our great war of liberation. The cornerstone of that struggle was a virtue called secularism without which a modern state cannot flourish. It was the responsibility of those elements to steer the BNP as a centrist political party, where the centre of the road is very wide at this juncture of the global history. We would have been fortunate to see our politics divided into two camps: fiscal liberal and fiscal conservative, which is the established divide line of the foes in a modern democracy. It is dismally to see the BNP drifting towards far right with the constant enunciation of a illusory dogma. It is a great irony that Sadeq Hossain Khoka and Mannan Bhuiyan had to share the podium with their once disdained Golam Azam and bear the stigma to listen to his speech only because he disdains the AL. Does it not seal the BNP's door to any one who still believes in the values for which he stood for in 1971?

The general election is approximately a year away. No one is prophetic enough to profess the results in any certain term. In the absence of a non-performing General Secretary, AL has a lot of organisational weaknesses. Internal feuds within the rank and file of the party are widespread. The results of the recent two by-elections also show that the party high command is not aware of the real strength of various factions.

The greatest tragedy of Bangladesh's politics that its players never take any lesson either from their own futile policies or from those of their adversaries. AL's boycotts and resignation from the parliament were the most serious and nondefensible fallacy it argued forward while in opposition. Even the late matriarch of the party, Begum Sulia Kamal, criticised the action in no uncertain terms. BNP is resorting to the same unpopular exercise without extracting any lesson from the blunder of its adversary. She is attributing so much emphasis on the unity of the alliance as if the BNP cannot stand on her own in facing the AL. The party which ruled the country for the longest duration of time, once after winning a democratic election, has no reason to be so desperate to hold on to any straw that comes on

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### To the Editor ...

#### Sajeda Chowdhury writes

Sir, My attention has been drawn to the editorial published in your esteemed newspaper on June 20, 2000 under the caption 'AL Should Not Taunt, but Welcome BNP to Sangsads'.

In the editorial following accusations have been made against me:

I said the opposition was coming to the parliament to save their red passports, other perks, and privileges that go with their JS seats.

I wanted Khaleda Zia to return 'property worth Tk 50 crores' her family is holding in possession since the assassination of President Zia.

The correctness of accusations number 1 can be found in your editorial of 19th June, 2000, which says 'The opposition led by Bangladesh Nationalist Party have decided to join

family and also illegal transfer of properties worth Tk 50 crore and requested her to return those properties to the army and to the people. I also raised this point before in the parliament questioning the legal and ethical basis behind making such lavish grants to her.

I don't understand, what prompted the editor to accuse the Awami League and myself in this way.

Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury Minister for Environment and Forest

#### Our reply

We thank the minister for responding to our editorial.

To say that opposition is returning to the parliament to 'save their seats' (as we did), and to say that the opposition was doing so to 'save their red passports and other perks (as the minister did), are not the same thing. Obviously the min-

ister refuses to see the difference between an objective criticism and a dislouring remark. Opponents in politics must and often do criticise one another. But they do not have to be undignified about it. This simple message we have so far failed to convey to our leaders.

— Editor

#### Profit without investment!

Sir, Bangladesh is getting some bad publicity as a good place for doing business, and making profit, without investment! Illegal toll collection has become highly profitable mass-scale business, practiced even by non-experienced entrepreneurs, independent of age or group right under the eagle eyes of the authority.

AZ Dhaka

They had the responsibility to

prove in education and some other social sectors appear sequel to the policies and activities undertaken by the previous government. The noble schemes for old age pensions, various support for women, provision of low cost shelters have, no doubt, been taken in hand, but its implementation smacks terribly of partisanship.

One highly laudable action witnessed during the year under review is the international recognition of 21 February as the Universal Mother Tongue Day. This well-deserved recognition received commendation from all, irrespective of Party affiliation, but was stated to have been the outcome of the initiative taken by a private individual. Receipt of Honorary Doctorate