

Jurisdiction of JS Bodies

LAST Tuesday the ministry of defence was unable to submit to the Jatiya Sangsad (Parliament) Standing Committee the documents dealing with the Court Martial of 12 army officers who were tried for assassinating President Ziaur Rahman nearly two decades ago. As explained by the joint secretary of the ministry to the JS body, the army had refused to make the relevant documents available.

The question that we would like to raise today is under what law did the army refuse to submit to the directions of the JS Standing Committee. Obviously there are matters of national security that the army needs to guard. But does it need to guard them from our parliament also? Is not our parliament the supreme law making and the highest public representative body? If yes, then how can the army deny submitting documents to it? Also, how can the defence ministry say that the army refused to submit the documents? Doesn't the ministry carry higher authority? In the US, which has more defence secrets to hide than any other country in the world, the defence forces regularly submit to hearings of Congressional Committees in which everything, including the most secret of documents are made available. Obviously there are strict code of conduct under which the public representatives are sworn to secrecy. Similar is the case in all democratic countries.

The irony of the matter is that the JS body has not asked for documents which are classified as secret. The documents in question have been classified as 'restricted' which is among the lowest ranking of classification of documents. Now if our parliament cannot have access to documents that are 'restricted', it is easily imaginable what will happen when it asks for those that are marked 'secret'. The refusal by the army not to provide these documents to our JS body cannot be accepted. The army cannot be beyond the supervision of the parliament and its refusal amounts to a contempt of the parliament. We urge an immediate overturning of the army's decision before the matter becomes a major bone of contention, as it should because we are a democracy. We also demand a clear public pronouncement of how government and army documents are classified, and the criteria used in the process. For very often the public is denied access to documents or information on the pretext of secrecy. In this connection we also demand the drawing up of a public's Right to Information Act which will guarantee our people their right to know what is happening within the government and all other bodies funded by the tax-payers' money. Of course there will be some exception in the case of national security, as is the case everywhere. But what goes on now in the name of 'official secrets' cannot be accepted any more.

Take a Principled Stand

FIRST, it was the 45-day strike of teachers at non-government secondary and higher secondary educational institutions and madrasahs on the demand for full disbursement of their basic salary from the government exchequer. Their counterparts at the primary level followed suit soon, enforcing a work stoppage from September 2 to press home an identical demand. On both occasions, the government's intervention was late and its prescription for the prevailing stand-off piecemeal. It worked all right—the strikes were eventually called off on a compromised settlement as regards the basic salary issue; however, we really wonder how long the arrangement would hold.

The government, especially the education ministry, prefers crisis management rather than long-term solution, it seems. Also, that it does not seem to have a principled stand on the issue, suggests its pacificatory attitude. A fluid stance on such a critical issue could be doubly damaging. First, it leaves the option open for the non-government teachers to take to the streets some time soon to get the remainder of their original demand realised. And second, it hampers management of public coffers and results in distributional anomaly. Partial acceptance of the demands raised by primary, secondary and higher secondary teachers of the enlisted non-government institutions would translate into disbursement of some 200 crore taka from the public exchequer. Now that the government has set the precedent, the amount would increase at regular intervals.

Whether the demand for nationalisation of the non-government educational institutions is justified or not is indeed debatable. There could be equally strong arguments on both sides, although, we believe, these entities should generate income to substantially bear recurrent expenditures. But, the issue goes beyond that. Whatever the government's outlook on this, it should be reflected in a concretised policy. There could be allowance and some modifications to it to accommodate changing needs of time. Such a definitive stand would draw the line for the teachers and the institutions they belong to.

Dismal, Indeed

THE Bangladesh contingent at the Sydney Olympics has ended its appearance by adding another debacle to its list of failures as sprinter Mahbub Alam broke down on the men's 200-metre track event on Wednesday. Mahbub, who won the 200-metre gold in the regional games in 1995 collapsed on the Olympic track after crossing about 25 metres. It was hardly any consolation that when he broke down he was in the fifth position among eight contestants.

In earlier events also, Bangladeshi athletes performed very poorly, far below even modest expectation. Sabrina Sultana bagged 46th and 39th positions in her two shooting events; swimmer Karar Samedul ranked 64th among 65 participants; Jui dashed down to 71st position; and Dolly was disqualified for a premature plunge into the pool. We have not yet graduated to any feel-good standard, far less bag medals. The question is: why do we go to compete with such amateurish preparations at global sporting events where the best in the world is on display? How long are we going to display our bankruptcy in games and sports? If our participation is only for the sake of participation then we must have lost our sense of self-esteem. After all, it is the Olympics, and whoever represents our country in the games, is carrying our flag, something we cannot make a short shrift of. With proper planning and action, with a population of 130 million, we should be able to produce at least a dozen Olympic medal winners. Let us concentrate on individual items first before going into team events for maximum results at this stage.

The Politics of Women's Representation in the National Legislature

It is rather difficult to understand how the state and the civil society are unable to comprehend that without women's active participation in the policy formulation that would address poverty, environment and other developmental issues the 'dream' would remain as elusive as ever. There should not be any doubt that without women's effective voice in the highest law-making body Bangladesh would continue to rank second among dozens of states where women are physically assaulted by their male partners ...

However, we are quite often told that since the top political leadership is held by two women there is no need for any further move in that direction. I find it difficult to digest that political leadership who are mostly male, and the two women at the national level leadership who operate within a structure dominated by masculine values that legitimize men's positions at the top of hierarchies allowing them to exercise control over women themselves believe in such absurd propositions. This is pure politics and a tendency to bury one's head in the sand in order to avoid facing the real issue. The state of Bangladesh is very good at it (i.e. creating confusion through useless dialogue, statements etc. so that the issue gets lost) and its *finesse* with regard to women's issues is almost unparalleled. It becomes very poignant on the question of power sharing, through women's meaningful voice in the legislature, with country's fifty per cent population.

The issue of women's representation is as old as the country itself. As a matter of fact, it goes beyond our liberation war of 1971. The thinking people of Bangladesh are all well aware of what it's all about. Just to refresh the memory of our readers, let me very briefly sketch how the managers of our state are dealing with this vital issue of women's representation in the Jatiya Sangsad. The maiden step was taken when fifteen reserved seats for women in the Jatiya Sangsad to be indirectly elected by the elected members of the parliament for a period of fifteen years, which turned out to be a vote bank for the winning party, was inducted into our constitution soon after the independence. Why? Because women were considered as 'backward' and needed special protection in order to take part in the most important organ of the government in a parliamentary system. Perhaps the protection was needed and then again perhaps it was not. This was politics as well. It does cross our mind that if the stalwarts of the liberation war were sincere about having women's voice in the legislature they would have nominated them from the general constituencies in addition to the reserved seats. But that was not the case. The ruling Awami League (AL) who propagated the ideals of democracy in its every twist and turn did not nominate a single woman during 1973 parliamentary election despite the fact that there were a number of very eminent women politicians (women politicians

who were directly elected from the general constituencies during the provincial election of 1954) as well as activists within AL's fold.

So the reserved seat phenomenon seems more like a ploy to pacify the women segment of the population rather than committed attempts to alleviate women's 'backwardness' through addition of women's effective voice in the legislative procedure of the country. Results were obvious. None of the women's concerns facing the country including the plight of the 'Biranongas' could be addressed and the liberation war-energized women lost the chance of gaining genuine parliamentary experience. Tragically, along with it, the politics of women's representation began with all its myopic manifestations whose logical

legislature and add their effective voice in the running of state affairs.

Realistically speaking women's demand for effective representation through the above mentioned *modus vivendi* should have been welcomed by the political leadership. The reasons are too far to seek. If it is, as they say, a democratic state then the state itself should not only take the principled stand but also actively create space and enabling environment so that fifty per cent of country's population can be equal partners, and thereby create a just social order, which alone can ensure the functioning of a constitutional state. It was all the more necessary at a time when the poor and marginalized constituents of

parties, when the chips are down, would like to have the continuation of the present system, which enables the winning party, be it BNP or AL, to get the necessary number in order to form the government. They would like to have its continuation despite the fact that it has not been able to further women's effective representation as evidenced by female MPs' failure to introduce 'care politics' something that introduces more humane politics. Instead both parties are again trying to fool country's fifty per cent population with their well familiar trickery, i.e. trying to shift the blame of not catering women's demands on each other.

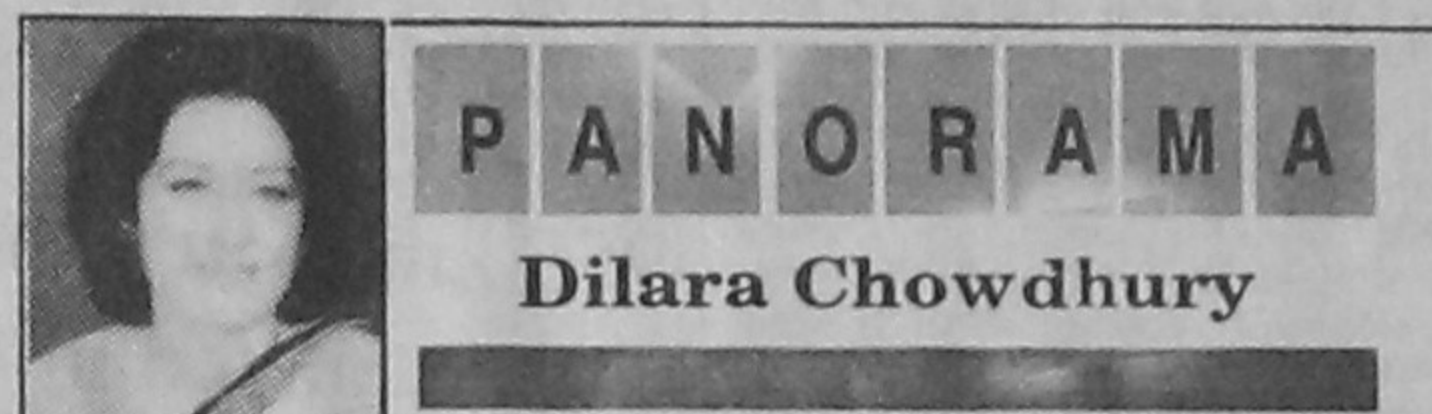
The current saga is nothing new but only the reminiscence of the past. At present a crucial bill is ready to be placed in the Jatiya Sangsad after being scrutinized by the Parliamentary Standing Committee but cannot be passed without the presence of the opposition and voting for it. As usual the AL chairman of the committee is blaming the opposition and 'worried' about the constitutional lacunae if the bill is not passed. What the honourable legislator does not mention is that the bill is intended to continue the present system for another ten years despite women organizations' demand for 64 to 150 (number is negotiable) reserved seats for women to be directly elected. The honourable MP's claim that the bill has included recommendations of the women's organizations is also not correct. In this context what difference does it make if BNP does not vote for the bill? If AL was sincere about women's effective representation in the legislature then it would have included demands of the women's organizations and could have exposed BNP's insensitivity on the issue if the later did not take part in the passage of the bill.

BNP on its part, like a broken record, alleges the government for not consulting them. But how can they accuse the government when they are not only absent from the legislative process of the country but did not also attend the Parliamentary Standing Committee meetings where they could have thrown their recommendations reflecting women's demands. As such the accusations raise BNP's bona fide intentions. Moreover, BNP non-seriousness and confusion in this regard becomes astounding when Mr. Jamiruddin Sircar, a BNP Standing Committee member contradicts the party Secretary General. Sircar states that his party would decide the matter when it returns to power with

two-third majority whereas the party Secretary General declares that his party has accepted the principle of direct election for increased reserved seats for women. That means there is no serious thinking about it within BNP. Besides the mind-set of BNP lawmaker is also alarming. Sircar feels that majority women could not care less about the demand for women's increased reserved seats and the principle of direct election (if he has carried an empirical study on the subject we would like to have the finding printed in the newspapers). It is, according to him, a 'headache' for the well-off women, and definitely not an election issue (hope women organizations mobilize enough women voters in his constituency so that he cannot return!).

Any way these declarations and counter declarations of AL and BNP are pure politics. We are all aware of the game that is being played by our major political parties in this regard. Remember when opposition AL wanting increased and directly elected reserved seats for women while BNP turning it down? And now the situation being just the opposite, that is BNP wanting (according to BNP Secretary General) what AL in opposition wanted and AL being in the shoes of then ruling BNP rejecting it? The hypocrisy of it has now reached all time high. The charade is nothing but a joke. Perhaps our leaders who control the state have an enormous capacity to underestimate the intelligence of the female segment of the electorate. All in all, it is discernible that the state of Bangladesh that was created in the name of democracy is not willing to mete out the fair deal that the women deserve so badly.

It is also disappointing that even the civil society leaders are mostly not on the side of this well deserved and just cause. The intelligentsia, who do not stop talking about the necessity of a functioning democracy, are also mute on this issue. It is rather difficult to understand how the state and the civil society are unable to comprehend that without women's active participation in the policy formulation that would address poverty, environment and other developmental issues the 'dream' would remain as elusive as ever. There should not be any doubt that without women's effective voice in the highest law-making body Bangladesh would continue to rank second among dozens of states where women are physically assaulted by their male partners ... (*Lives Together, Worlds Apart: Men and Women in a Time of Change*, UNFPA). As long as Bangladesh keeps its women population at the periphery, throttle their voice and remain reluctant to give them their due it would continue to dominate the world press with Bangladeshi women's predicament (acid throwing etc.) at the hands of their male counterparts.



PANORAMA
Dilara Chowdhury

(illogical) course was the increase of reserved seats from 15 to 30 while retaining the crucial controlling weapon of indirect election by the next regime for another 10 years at the expiry of its first appearance. The vote bank system became so lucrative that it got a fresh lease of life for another 10 years. Politics kept going unabated at the expense of silencing women's voice. And like a coiled serpent it remained in our body politic digging deeper into the psyche of our power hungry politicians. The pretense and facade of women's representation continued to hang around nation's neck like a dead albatross until the heralding of parliamentary democracy in 1991. And with it came the resurgent hopes. There were reasons to be exuberant as hopes rose in the backdrop of a newly emergent generation of women activists, an articulated women's movement with a clear vision and goal and women population's active participation in the democracy movement of 1990 and resurgence of leadership's commitment to democracy. This time around women's voice was more demanding more specific, more visionary. The demand was for increased number of reserved seats to be filled through direct election. Women were not ready to be either the 'ornaments' or the 'kama manas' of Jatiya Sangsad. And it was thought to be a time that state would grant the women their rightful place in the national

general impression is that both

To the Editor ...

Radio talk show

Sir, Betar is getting more in arranging interactive radio talk shows. The facility available to the Prime Minister or a VIP should be available to other also, for example, to the opposition politicians (at least to the elected MPs). Telephone, calls accepted should be free of charge (toll-free). It is not fair to use the controlled electronic media for electioneering. I generally do not listen to the PM's speeches as I am familiar with the pattern, and she hardly says anything new.

I have one integrated question for the PM: when telephone demand will be available; why the installation charge for new connection is the highest in the world; and why private sector is not allowed to help on fixed line system? In this age of Neoliberalism and free market, state patronage and business monopolies are out of date, and the PM is aware of it, but perhaps is wrongly advised. She should guard against vested interests.

A Listener
Dhaka

Political Neoliberalism

Sir, The problems and implications of Neoliberalism, applied with imposition of 'open' global trade, and the resulting plight of the nations in the Third World, were well articulated by the noted Orientalist Edward W Said (DS, September 19). This has been supplemented by the mass agitation at the Seattle WTO Conference and other WB meetings earlier this year, (the richest countries enjoy 82 per cent of the expanding export trade, and 68 per cent of the FDI, DS, Sept 21).

We cannot handle even a much smaller version of the scenario, namely, the healthy functioning of the super-rich Saare region we lived together for 200 years, and now cannot come closer in fifty. Our sluggish empathy, combined with the slow pace of development and evolution, is measured in generations, not decades. Since the life expectancy is low, patience has to be displayed for a much longer period; which financial circumstances do not allow.

Instead, we have raised our intolerance to a super high level; and now cannot come down to earth. The communication gap is vertical, not horizontal. How the younger generation will take it? They do not like what they see while looking up. These IT kids have more understanding than we give them credit for (I am a

kind victim of my son, thanks to my introducing him to play with the computer while he was barely five or six). They can certainly take care of them, and also of us, but in different ways.

The adulation stage is overripe now, and is at the bursting point. The sweet fruit will now begin to taste bitter. In fact, this hatred, animosity, and bitterness are spilling over the newspaper headlines: new varieties of killings are being displayed in the political arena almost daily.

Some enterprising political leaders are having visions of opening political super markets and one-stop shopping centres politically air-conditioned of course. After sometime it might be difficult to find neutral offices. Bangladesh might be low in the UN lists on poverty, human rights, GDP, GNP, but politically we must be one of the most sensitive communities on earth.

In Dhaka, the political leaders are happy meddling in their own internal affairs, and thinking of the ensuing polls how to remain in power, or seek the mandate for a new power base. For what? For repeating what we have seen during the last ten years (1990s), with or without automatic rule (transparency requires no *burqa* or veil). Democracy is a merchandise or currency to be exchanged for goodies. Politics today is market-oriented, and the highest bid is for the self! Now more and more political haunts (weekly country markets) will spring up, to exchange raw materials for promised finished products. The latter definition applies to local politics and is well grasped, first by the spectators, and, later, by the voters.

We were supposed to be in low-orbit at the end of the century just passed; but our political leaders are acting modest when they do not aspire to take them with us to the next higher orbit. Spiritually there are seven stages of the development of humanity, but the rulers in Dhaka created several optional stages during the training period, which have so far lasted for three decades.

Back to Neoliberalism. Dhaka is not talking about it (the fashion is still confined to pre-and-post-liberation periods), with nobody getting any wiser. If the political parties are employing codes, then we need decoders and encryption service. Isn't the natural genetic code enough to keep us busy?

A Citizen
Dhaka

OPINION

Low-Intensity Conflict and Bangladesh

Bindu Ranjan Chakma

LOW-intensity conflict (LIC) is one of the major phenomena in today's world. Although expert like Francis Fukuyama predicted elimination of almost all forms of major warfare with the termination of the Cold-War confrontation, yet LIC seem to be an endemic problem for many third world countries like Bangladesh. Bangladesh has been engulfed with various forms of LIC: group clashes, repression, insurrection, terrorism, insurgency, smuggling etc. This is definitely hampering the process of nation-building in different ways. Hence, a national debate to find out a mechanism for building a national consensus to obliterate all these problems is a *sine qua non*.

In true sense, Bangladesh is not a perfect democratic country like USA or even India. The democratic institutions are loosely established here. Although it is a multi-party system in configuration, the relationship between the ruling party and the major opposition parties remains always at loggerhead. After the fall of the tyrannical rule of president H M Ershad, when the BNP came to power in a comparatively democratic way, the present ruling party Awami League (AL) along with other parties, instead of cooperating and extending cordial support on various national issues, rather continuously boycotted the parliament, went on calling hartals (strikes) one after another on the plea of non-existence of congenial democratic environment in the parliament as well as in the whole country. This accusation is in fact partially true. Today the AL is also seemed to be persistently endeavouring to impose one-party rule upon the people. It has launched a virulent campaign against all the opposition parties by promulgating various politically motivated legal decrees. The Public Safety Act of 1999 is such a legal instrument.

Although, its principal objective is to maintain law and order, yet the Act has been found very less effective in containing anti-social elements and armed miscreants. Because, the ruling party is per se having such reserved rowdy and desperate young-groups, such legal instrument, is perhaps the most precarious forms of LIC. However, in Bangladesh in the last two decades, this form of LIC mainly remained confined in the CHT. Although this form of LIC is also usually non-conventional in nature, but has possibility of

Then again the way the BNP is now desperately campaigning to oust the AL from power, its warning touches the level of adding another bloody chapter in the national history of Bangladesh. Hence, it appears that a confrontation persists between the ruling AL and the BNP led four-party opposition alliance.

Although group violence is not openly taking place at intensified level, yet tension between Muslims and Hindus, Muslims and other ethnic minority groups overtly or covertly persist in many areas of Bangladesh. The recent unprovoked attack on adivashi villages in Nagoan under Rajshahi Division led by Hatem Ali, former UP chairman and killing adivashi leader Alfred Soren is an example of sort. Many Hindus in Bangladesh still feel insecure and they have continued to migrate to India, particularly in West Bengal, Tripura and Assam. The most vulnerable area in this regard is the CHT where tension between the hill people and the Bengali settlers still highly persists. The violence of 22nd October 1999 in Dignala and very recently in Marishya are the two such instances.

The most consternation is that the terrorists are now openly carrying on their subversive activities. Extortion, snatching away personal belongings at gunpoint, kidnapping targeted individuals and demanding either huge ransom for their release or killing them etc have become daily occurrences in Bangladesh. It is usually reported that large quantum of intoxicating drug are being smuggled from India via different border points. The CHT is now almost a haven for the smugglers because the law enforcers appear to be ineffective or indifferent. The Bangladesh Rifles too has failed in keeping an all through effective vigilance along the border.

Insurrection and insurgency are perhaps the most precarious forms of LIC. However, in Bangladesh in the last two decades, this form of LIC mainly remained confined in the CHT. Although this form of LIC is also usually non-conventional in nature, but has possibility of

taking the configuration of conventional warfare. For instance, the politico-military confrontation between the LTTE and the Sinhalese dominated Sri Lanka armed forces, the conflict between the federal armed forces of Russia and Chechen rebels are no more confined within the meaning of LIC. In Bangladesh insurrection and insurgency, if any, may not ever reach that level of intensification but that is no consolation. Although many arms-exporting countries have pledged themselves several times to reduce the level of arms exports, what is surprising is that 90 per cent of their conventional and non-conventional arms exports goes to third world countries which are virtually locked up in proxy wars. Ifsofacto, the insurgents can yet procure arms to launch offensives against the parent governments.

An early solution to all these problems is absolutely essential for national integrity, strengthening of democratic institutions and rule of law in Bangladesh. To reach this political destination, all political parties in the country should come forward towards building a national consensus in resolving the national problems. All parties should have the mentality of not giving shelter to killers and criminals and give up the path of political killing and terrorism. Organising frequent strikes should be shunned for greater economic interest of the country. The Public Safety Act should not be misused and made more binding and enforceable in cracking down terrorism, arms-smuggling and protecting citizens' liberty.

Elements of discrimination should be removed to build more communal harmony between the Hindus and Muslims. The ethnic minority groups should be protected from the periphery of extinction. Forceful confiscation of their properties should be stopped. Opportunity for greater participation in the political development process and other development activities should be given to them. Their ethnic identity and traditional land-rights should be recognised and guaranteed by the constitution by bringing amendments, if necessary. The CHT peace accord of

1997 might have provided the basic semblance of democratic norms in the three Hill District Councils, but it did not perhaps adequately address the aforesaid two-most crucial points. As a result, instead of bringing peace and stability in the CHT, it rather has led to creating rift and dissension not only among the people of CHT, but also among the major political parties of the country although their support and opposition to the accord is more motivated with vested political interests.

Bangladesh is a signatory to the 1967 Convention on elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and children. But it is regrettable, the lot of women and children has not yet improved. Still the relatives of Yeasmin, Labina Haoi, Kalpana Chakma and others are eagerly waiting to get proper justice from the existing legal system of Bangladesh. The political elite of Bangladesh could extend support to the movement for establishing a New International Economic Order, raise voice against division of the world into developed and developing ones, but they are either dumb or disgruntled when one calls for a movement directed towards stopping hegemonic aspiration of the dominant class over the dominated groups.

A certain measure of stability of the state is important for growth and investment. Justification of repression and one party's political monopolization on all national issues to achieve development is dubious. A correct balance between human rights and development is although far from easy, but yet indispensable. However both can be promoted for the benefits of the people. Eradication of multi-party system are to be encouraged to promote democratic values. And, if this does not happen, LIC will also continue to plague Bangladesh, and Bangladesh will remain perpetually underdeveloped.

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