

## Welcome breakthrough in Bonn

*The agenda for peace should override all other considerations*

**T**HE entirely fluid post-Taliban scenario which gave rise to a grave concern for the future of Afghanistan seems to have been addressed. Not squarely to be sure, but as best as it could be, under the circumstances. So it is with a sense of relief that we greet the positive outcome from the talks in Bonn that engaged world attention for nine days in alternating sequences of hope and despair. Representatives of Northern Alliance, former King Mohammad Zahir Shah and two small exile groups have signed an accord envisaging an interim administration to be headed by Hamid Karzai, an anti-Taliban *Pastun* commander. The interim authority will take over on December 22 and govern Afghanistan for six months until the former king Zahir Shah convenes *loya jirga*, a traditional but much-disused tribal council to sort out matters. The *jirga* will eventually negotiate a long term political settlement for a country ravaged by war one time too many. Meanwhile, the dovetailing of a UN peace-keeping force to the interim government is regarded as a guarantee for the latter's success.

The clinching factor has been the choice of Hamid Karzai to head the interim government. The missing *Pastun* element in the Bonn talks has been somewhat made up for by his placement at the head of the interim cabinet to be. Also his being anti-Taliban, not merely in thoughts but also in deeds, as is evidenced by his military campaign against the last outpost of Taliban power in Kandahar, made him acceptable to the Northern Alliance (NA). It is extremely significant that Karzai has been chosen over the head of Northern Alliance leader Dostum, a dominant NA figure, who must have himself entertained the notion of being at the top of the interim administration. That's where a bridge-head has been laid to reach out to the *Pastuns* who are the majority community and must therefore be taken onboard for evolving any meaningful political order in Afghanistan. Karzai has the intrinsic potential to play the catalyst with the beleaguered Taliban among the *Pastun* community.

What has been cobbled together under the UN auspices and mediation does not admit of being immediately called an Afghan solution to an Afghan problem, but certainly a step in that direction has been taken. For, admittedly, the delegations to the Bonn talks represented only a segment of the Afghan society. The responsibility now devolves on the new interim leadership to integrate other ethnic and religious groups, including women, into a truly multi-ethnic broadbased covenant for the peace and progress of Afghanistan. Already the presence of two women in the 29-member cabinet is a good omen.

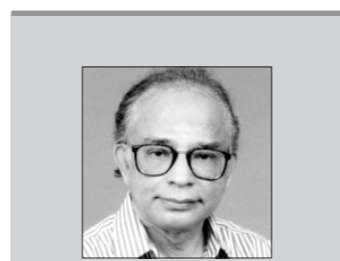
It was all love and peace at the end of the Bonn talks but when this spirit of *bon homie* is tested on the hostile grounds of Afghanistan that its true quality will have been measured. Basically, a quest for weightage, power and influence had brought the factions together in Bonn and led them into signing up a deal. One has to see now as to how this works at the implementation stage. The Geneva Accord of 1988 had foundered as much on the rock of fierce feuding between component ethnic groups as on that of non-cooperation between the neighbouring foreign powers which had also been signatories to it.

The big difference in the present context, however, is that both India and Pakistan have welcomed the Bonn agreement as a step in the right direction. Understandably so, because Hamid Karzai besides being a moderate *Pastun* is also anti-Taliban and as such acceptable to India. Furthermore, the Northern Alliance is going to be the dominant partner in the interim arrangement which suits India. As for Pakistan with its *Pastun* orientation, Karzai is a *Pastun* himself and also a known phenomenon who had made Quetta his home in exile for a pretty long time.

India, Pakistan, Iran and Russia should strive to keep their hands off Afghanistan. The US and Britain would do well not to meddle in Afghan affairs taking any undue advantage of their military success. After all, it has been earned through a lot of blood-spilling among innocent civilians. Let Afghanistan be its natural self. The Afghans have had enough of foreign intervention, outside interference, and feuding, much of it fomented by outside quarters to serve their own interest. Things should change now.

The battle-weary Afghans are hungering for peace and a right to live as human beings. The sole agenda for all concerned should be to consolidate peace in that country to let it forge ahead.

## Inside and beyond the sangshad



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

**F**OR better or worse, our MPs usually make news outside the Sangshad. Recently, however, they hogged the headlines as a collective body for certain developments within the august House. The first of these developments occurred in respect of quorum, the requirement for one fifth of the members of the parliament to be present during a sitting of the Sangshad. The second was the demand made by some MPs to have additional or enhanced facilities for accommodation, transport etc. Both the events took place within the Sangshad and in quick succession. Their origin and ramifications can be seen beyond the Sangshad. They are germane to the issue of effective parliament as well as the role and responsibilities of MPs.

Except on special occasions fulfilling the requirement of quorum has been a problem of long-standing for the Sangshad. It becomes acute when the opposition abstains or boycotts the sittings in sessions en masse on a continuous basis. However, the boycott by opposition, while aggravating the crisis of quorum, does not account for the failure of even sixty of the MPs belonging to the ruling coalition to turn up in Sangshad sittings. According to a news report members of the 216 strong treasury bench seemed to have lost interest in the business transacted during the new parliament's opening session that had a total of nineteen working days. As a result, in all but the first two sittings the House was handicapped for lack of quorum and was out on a limb. Not having inside information one can only speculate about the reasons for the lugubrious record on attendance in the Sangshad. MPs who are not under party directive to abstain or to

boycot sessions may not turn up in a fit of what is known in philosophy as the Prisoner's dilemma. Uncertainty about the decision of fellow parliamentarians about attendance on a particular day may tilt in favour of absence or delay by a wavering MP or MPs. If this indeed is the problem then communication among the MPs and/or vigilant exertion from the Whips can make a difference for the better. Absence or delay in attendance

continuous abstention or boycott by opposition members seriously undermines the parliament by preventing the Sangshad from playing its meaningful role. A weak parliament can only lead to a powerful executive which is contrary to parliamentary democracy. Attendance of MPs is only the pre-requisite to a functioning parliament. To be fully functioning and effective parliament in a democratic polity has to be supported by MPs

given against the decision of the party from which he/she was elected. Even abstention from vote may invoke the consequence of this Article. Considering the fact that only in no-confidence motions and for the approval of budget vote of the MPs in favour of the party is crucial, the sweeping nature of the provision of Article 70 becomes obvious. In its present scope and intent, it is neither necessary for the continuity of the government nor

that most of the time laws passed mechanically and under pressure from the party whip cannot generate genuine interest for them. Also, such laws may not reflect the aspirations and interest of their constituencies and fail to be amenable to accountability.

The role of MPs as legislators may in reality be a myth but it has been used vigorously in discussions and writings to circumscribe the involvement of MPs in develop-

the involvement of MPs. This should include participation through consultation at planning stage, and communication and monitoring at the time of implementation. Rather than having the MP to spend valuable time haphazardly in the Secretariat, the ministries should devise a working procedure that will ensure both intimate interaction at various stages and minimize the need for it on an informal basis. Once the logical involvement of MPs in development matters is recognized their present shadowy role can be given a concrete and satisfactory shape. In addition to this MPs may be allocated a grant for development schemes in their constituencies to be spent according to a guideline and subject to audit. This may take away some of the pressure from the concerned ministries and at the same time promote decentralization of development activities.

Once the multi-faceted roles of MPs are recognized their demand for a small office in the parliament and in their constituency with a small staff will appear as more than justified. Without these facilities MPs cannot develop their 'professionalism' and discharge their responsibilities effectively. This will also be one way of reducing the gap between a minister and an MP, the cause for much heart-burning. Another step to achieve this will be to give them the privilege of using flag. If persons below them in the warrant of procedure are entitled to flags there is no reason why they should not have the same. Besides, this has no financial implications. Rather than increasing the number of seats in the Sangshad, it is more important to give adequate powers and facilities to existing MPs to make them more contented and effective.

MPs can and should be criticized for their absence in Sangshad sessions and for other lapses. But there is little in their demand for enhanced facilities that can be faulted. In fact meeting their demands and empowering them beyond the demands may ensure greater responsibility on their part, both inside and beyond the Sangshad.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist and economist.

## IN MY VIEW

**Promoting and strengthening the role of MPs for the sake of effective parliamentary democracy requires a greater role in legislation than is at present the case. Though MPs are, first and foremost, legislators they have little to do with law making as almost all legislative initiatives come from government. Beholden to party loyalties, MPs can rarely change the outcome of a legislation that the government seriously wants. Thus both for initiation of a draft law and scrutiny and approval MP's role is more or less passive even though the Rules of Procedure provide for both.**

may also result from other pre-occupations of MPs which require their presence elsewhere. The pressure of such extra-parliamentary pre-occupations or commitments are usually higher during the first session of the parliament. The continuous absence of the opposition party members from sessions on the other hand, makes the treasury bench members complacent about the proceedings inside Sangshad. Without any challenge, they may lapse in to a casual mode, even languor except on important occasions when budget or laws are passed. But for an MP each sitting is important, there being on average only about twenty sittings in a session. It is primarily in the sittings of the Sangshad that MPs can articulate their important role and exercise the power vested under the law as representatives of the people. Whether in the treasury bench or in the opposition MPs discharge their obligations to the constituency when they hear speeches and speak out in the sittings of the session. No ground or explanation is strong enough to absolve them of failure to attend. If occasional absence by treasury bench members from Sangshad is an embarrassment for the Speaker and causes consternation to the Whips

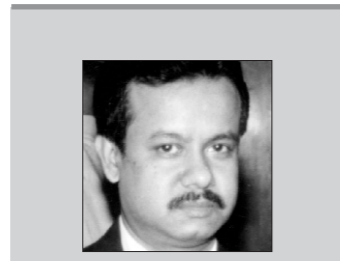
who are free to discuss matters of legislation and governance in a free and frank atmosphere. This is particularly true for the treasury bench members because their comments and criticisms of the draft laws and policies of the government are more likely to be balanced and constructive. But the tradition of partisan politics within the Sangshad leaves little room for independent stand to be taken by an MP unless he or she is an independent member ab initio. While reviewing the parliamentary experience in Britain and Bangladesh the Parliamentary delegation from Bangladesh observed in 1994: "Though most MPs are elected on party nominations where voters demonstrate their preference for the party they wish to be governed by, they continue to reserve the right to expect their MP in his individual capacity to intervene on their behalf with government. This is true of Britain as it is of Bangladesh." In Bangladesh not only the tradition of MPs acting primarily as the representatives of the electorate has not developed because of the zeal and control of party whips, the possibilities in this regard also have been forestalled by the constitution. Article 70 of the constitution lays down that an MP is liable to lose his/her parliamentary seat if vote is

helpful in promoting the stature and importance of MPs in the Sangshad. The present ruling coalition having required majority in the Sangshad may review the restrictive article and give serious consideration for its amendment. They owe it to the cause of parliamentary democracy.

Promoting and strengthening the role of MPs for the sake of effective parliamentary democracy requires a greater role in legislation than is at present the case. Though MPs are, first and foremost, legislators they have little to do with law making as almost all legislative initiatives come from government. Beholden to party loyalties, MPs can rarely change the outcome of a legislation that the government seriously wants. Thus both for initiation of a draft law and scrutiny and approval MP's role is more or less passive even though the Rules of Procedure provide for both. While recognizing the rationale behind government initiative for legislation and its anxiety to get the draft law passed, the need for having some private members bill to overcome the tyranny of tradition and a greater scope for scrutiny of draft laws by MPs after they are tabled by the government should also be given due importance. It will be stating the obvious to point out

ment activities, particularly in their constituencies. In spite of the fact that MPs in developed countries very often take up issues of development on behalf of their constituency and act as catalyst even for partial mobilization of resources the justification for similar involvement by MPs in a developing country like Bangladesh is often denied and denied. This is not only taking an idealistic view of the matter but for the same reason amounts to a narrow and unrealistic interpretation of the role of MPs. Whatever may be laid down in Rules of Procedure and accepted under received wisdom, MPs inevitably become involved in development matters of the country in general and of their constituency in particular because their electorate expect and urge them to do so. When an MP moves from one ministry to another pursuing development projects and lobbying for resources it is not only for the sake of getting re-elected but also as a humanitarian gesture. The greater is the degree of underdevelopment and privation, the heavier will be the burden of conscience on the MPs. This being the case, development activities, both in the short and the medium term, should be undertaken by ministries in such a way that there is built-in arrangement for

## Proverbs and paradoxes



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

**I**F early to bed and early to rise were to make a man healthy, wealthy and wise, then who would fill the bill more than he who for thirty years went to bed by ten at night and woke up at four in the morning? But his life never changed for the better, either in health or wealth or wisdom. After all these years when he emerged from the cloud of dust he swept on the streets, he was an old man with ailing lungs, penniless and evermore confused. Today he would vouch that proverbs are contrived truths. They are nothing but hallowed words of hollow wisdom.

This is a man who has been driven by proverbs all his life. For him proverbs were the essence of life, a sort of wisdom made easy for people who never got a chance to learn otherwise. It was a proverb that convinced him early in life that he could never ride a car because he did not finish school. His wife teased him for this for the rest of his life. The Municipal Corporation had given them a bullock cart, which

they rode every morning, she would say.

He believed that the morning showed the day. He sent his children to school and wanted them to show signs of future promises. He was very strict with them, and never let his rules relent on them. A stitch in time saves nine was his motto. It was the molding time for the kids until they entered college, he argued with his wife who thought it was a waste of time trying to bring education into a family that came

his despair. At least his children were an improvement over him. They had studied up to the tenth grade, while he had fumbled in the third.

Slow but steady wins the race, and that was the only way to make progress in life. For generations, his has been a family of dust-inhaling sweepers, their blood muddied by the squalors of the world. He grew up watching his father get drunk with sundown, and then argue and quarrel in the rambunctious stupor

of tea and a cheroot sitting on the pavement with other sweepers. Pride would soon prowl in the corridors of their conversation as sweepers forgot their roles in life and got excited over who called the shots amongst them. Egos of men are like a torrential rain whose waters find ways into ditches of every size.

All his life, this sweeper man tried to cut his coat according to his cloth. He never exceeded his means to execute his hope. Once

she could never have a place in his life.

Again, it was a proverb that carried him through. What cannot be cured must be endured. He locked up this secret in the innermost chamber of his heart, but spent years sitting on the pavement to catch a glimpse of her every morning. Where there is a will there is a way, they said. He never thought it could be true for him, because wills could not grow in the void. But then while there was life,

did not match with what he reaped. And the pile of dust grew taller inside his lungs in the meantime, giving him a cough that wrecked his chest from time to time like a monsoon storm.

The other proverb was even more paradoxical. Honesty is the best policy. What does it mean? He thought it over and over again. Is it innocence or simplicity? Is it courage or crassness of the soul? To him it was an oxymoron, two opposites clashing in the length of a single sentence. How could anyone hold honesty and the best policy in the same breath? One has to be opportunistic to know and choose the best policy, but honesty means truthfulness, the character of being upright, sincere, truthful or frank.

His own life has been an example of that contradiction. He could never express his mind to the schoolteacher because it would not have been the best policy for him. One day she stopped coming and he never saw her again. He still sits on that pavement, which will be demolished next week. He smokes his cheroot and then coughs like a terrible calamity. All the dust that he had inhaled in thirty years is raised in his lungs in the whirlwind of age.

Now he goes to bed late but wakes up early. His health has declined, and there is no wealth. But he no longer believes in proverbs, and his paradoxes are gone. That must be wisdom, he wonders. Or is it?

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

## CROSS TALK

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from generations of sweepers. Ultimately she proved right when his kids stumbled on the doorsill of SSC examinations one after another, and the neighbor's son made it to the cleaning crew of an airline and then rose to fame as a movie star.

It was again a proverb that came to his rescue when nothing else had worked. What was lotted could not be blotted, he said to himself and then inducted his children into the dusty world of street sweepers. But then there was a crack of satisfaction in the dark and stuffy world of

of a drunkard. He had learned as a boy not to touch liquor, which was the elixir for friends and colleagues who could not handle the fact that it was their destiny to make a living by cleaning other men's mess.

He also believed that pride had its fall but then never quite understood how it applied to the likes of him. He had hardly anything to be proud of in a life where the highest point was to be able to finish sweeping his length of the street before devoutly returned from mosque after morning prayers. Then would come the breakfast time with a mug

his children had failed to cross the bounds of schools, he did not want to have a dream. But he loved to watch this schoolteacher who walked by the pavement every morning just about the time he would be between chugging down the last drop of tea and biting off the end of his cheroot before lighting it. She would fill the air with the fragrance of jasmine and stir his heart with a whiff of breeze. A twinge of pain ran through his head every time he felt the churn of a gagged animal inside him and thought how he was condemned to a fate where

there was hope. He indulged himself in this only special thing in his life that made him soar above the humdrum of a sweeper's world.

But he could never reconcile with the precepts of two proverbs. Why do they say that as you sow, so you reap? Who sowed this fate for him, which he reaped in the pencil dark mornings on the streets of Dhaka for thirty long years? And what happened to all that he sowed in life with patience and hope? His children, his hard work and his desire for a woman he watched for almost ten years? What he sowed

## The culprit: Political abuse of students -- not student politics

MANZOOR AHMED

**T**HE Prime Minister has threatened to prohibit student politics. The government is considering for submission to the next parliament session a new law banning political activities by students.

The unseemly spectacle of armed cadres and thugs running loose on campus; the battle, in the literal sense of the word, to capture and control student dormitories; extraction of mafia-style tolls and protection money; and rowdy demands about dismissal and appointment of vice-chancellors all in the name of student organizations claiming their loyalty to political parties in the ruling coalition has been an embarrassment to the regime. Not that these phenomena were unheard of during the previous regime. But this time the Prime Minister, after the landslide victory

at the polls, did pledge to give the highest priority to reversing the nose-dive in the state of law and order.

It must have been particularly galling for the government that there has been no sign of improvement in the situation on the campuses even after the Prime Minister took the unusual step of suspending the leadership body of the student front of her party. The Frankenstein that has been nurtured over a long time appears to have gone out of control.

Unfortunately, the ugly scenes on campus are a manifestation of a deeper malaise of the political culture. Student politics, as it is usually understood, is the involvement of students in national political issues or educational issues that affect them -- debating and expressing views, even sometimes resorting to protest rallies and demonstrations. Most demo-

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cratic-minded citizens will agree that this itself is not a serious problem.

The culprit is the blatant, all-holds-barred, use and manipulation of students by political parties for partisan and even personal political advantage. In fact, the vibrant political life on campus with free and energetic expression of positions, ranging the political spectrum from the left to the right, on national and international issues disappeared a long time ago.

Several batches of graduates have gone through their university life without experiencing the excite-

ment of student union elections or taking part in the social, cultural and political activities that an elected student union is supposed to organize on campus. This important process of democratic self-government of student affairs has been banished from the campuses of Bangladesh by the cadres and musclemen planted on campus by the main political parties of all hues and shades.

The process of corrupting student life and vitiating the campus atmosphere was started by the henchmen of the military regime of the Pakistan era with the formation

of the National Student Federation in the 1960s, master-minded and bank-rolled by the intelligence apparatus of the government of that time. The effort to make student organizations appendages of political parties continued in the post-liberation period. But the military rulers who came later looked back to their martial predecessors of the Pakistan days for inspiration and lessons. New student organizations were created specifically to serve their political masters. Regrettably, after restoration of democracy in 1990, political parties found it convenient to follow

the pattern set by the military rulers. The major parties captured the student organizations and made them instruments of their political strategy. Student organizations ceased to function as true and independent bodies of students.

Making student organizations servile tools of partisan politics is part of a pattern that is seen in the whole educational system. The University Ordinance of 1973, which governs university administration, has been abused by political parties to put loyalists in university management. The recent sacking of Vice-chancellors and

placing party loyalists again in these positions do nothing to restore confidence in the system. The paranoia about loyalty and the need to satisfy the demands and greed of supporters have perverted the purposes and functioning of the whole educational system from the primary school to the university.

How will a law to ban student politics stem the rot that has spread in the system? It is difficult to see how a law, presumably to impose restraint on students, would help when the problem is the behaviour and values of political parties and politicians. How would it be enforced? Such a law is most likely to face legal challenge on the grounds of constitutional rights.

There is a strong case for a moratorium on political activities in educational institutions, because the present extra-ordinary situation demands special measures. But this moratorium has to be put into effect by decisions and change in

behaviour by the government and the ruling political parties in the first instance. Not by passing a law that may be seen as blaming the victims for the problem and, in fact, may spark off student unrest.

Little will be achieved, if partisan loyalty remains the main criterion for management and other decisions, including appointments and promotion of administrators and faculty. The process of change in political values and behaviour can begin with unilateral action by parties in the ruling coalition to dissolve their student fronts as well as their hidden teacher fronts. The government then will be able to hold the administrators of academic institutions accountable, and give them total backing, for acting according to existing laws and regulations without fear and favour.

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