

Parliamentary reforms

Laws for lawmakers are the crying need



M. M. REZAUL KARIM

and promote interests of their constituents, but assist the government by formulating policy and providing guidance for good governance through debate and enactment of law. But how well do they carry out these bounden duties? It is a pity that many of them appear non-serious about the need to be present in the parliament promptly and regularly. It is most unfortunate that quorum in parliamentary sessions take long to form, some-

making good that loss and of repaying the so-called loans from the willing investors. But, members of parliament are provided with too modest means to do so. Yet, they do fulfill their obligations in some way or other and most often accomplish much more. Do they do so by honest means? A big question. Both the present and the previous government sought and obtained lists of property and assets of Ministers and members of

some years ago, giving the latter the unusual and highly substantial perk of a duty free vehicle, made the office of a member of parliament dangerously more lucrative. Under these circumstances, one method of holding a check on their alleged unlawful income is to make public their statements of income and assets and to check those against their subsequent gains. Also, a sizable section of members use their sudden elevation of social

eligibility of parliamentary candidates. The candidates must have a minimum educational qualification of a bachelor's degree and must show evidence of clearance of their utility charges. In Bangladesh, we impose condition on clearance of bank loans or its installment payments. But, such restrictions can address only the periphery of the problems. Only a change of mindset and social sanctions appear imperative to

proportional representation system several members are elected in one constituency, on the basis of highest number of votes received proportionately among the candidates of contesting political parties. The advantage of this system lies in the fact that the candidates contest not as individuals but collectively for all their party candidates together in one constituency. In that event, an individual candidate does not have to work only for himself and, therefore, would deter him or her from using undue money and muscle power. There may be a combination of single constituency and proportional representation to ensure better human materials in the legislature, like in many developing and developed countries.

Another issue that deserves attention of the general public is the tenure of our parliament which is now 5 years. Since 1991, all the political parties, which lost elections, alleged, in varying degrees, that the elections had been unfair and heavily rigged. Though in most cases they later reconciled, but soon started violent movement to topple the government before the end of its tenure. Consequently, demonstrations, hartals and other methods which generally turned violent were resorted to, thereby creating serious political instability, loss of production, thwarting development activities and shying away investment and industrialization. Besides, such movement hindered progress of establishing the desired democratic system and tradition. A reduced tenure of the parliament to 4 years may, therefore, be viewed as a way to a reduced propensity for a movement directed to topple the government prematurely. Instead, the opposition parties would hopefully devote themselves more to propagate and campaign for winning the next election. If the American President can be elected only for a 4 year term and also legislatures of many countries, our parliament can also be elected for the same duration. In politics, nothing is sacrosanct and certainly not the tenure of the parliament, if this serves national interests and promotes democratic values better.

Many countries have bicameral legislatures wherein some or all members of the Upper House are nominated. Nominated members generally are highly distinguished citizens drawn from different sectors of the society who are either unwilling or unable to contest in elections. They represent that section of legislators, who exercise check and balance on the Lower House and decide issues mostly on merit than merely on political considerations. But Bangladesh is not a Federal State and has no constituent provinces and, therefore, can not have a bicameral legislature, at least for the time being.

An institutional reform, however, can be undertaken by way of introducing the system of proportional representation in electing legislators. In contrast to the existing British Westminster style of single constituency, under the

GIVE alms to the beggar, money to the poor, service to the needy, health to the sick, knowledge to the ignorant, education to the children and so on and so forth. These are axiomatic truth and acceptable duty for mankind. There is, however, a common element in all these --- one set of people give and another set receive. But what happens if the donors themselves are the recipients, and they give themselves plenty of perks, remuneration and privileges?

This happens to legislators of our and, for that matter, any other parliament. When the issue of enhancing their material benefits and privileges are concerned, some of our parliamentarians become most vocal, prompt and ideal lawmakers. The parliament recently made laws and gave its members and also government Ministers enhanced remuneration, living allowances, house rent, travel allowances, etc. Of course, the beneficiaries had so long received inadequate benefits as members of this noble profession. If the newly-introduced measures increase their efficiency and enable them to perform functions better, it is not only well and good but most desirable. But, is this the case? Will it improve their service, both in quality and quantity? Some wonder. Or, will these impart them greater arrogance of power? One must also take into account the impoverished country of ours which have limited resources that call for optimum utilization among competing needs.

We have, indeed, many illustrious members in the parliament who are sagacious and endowed with rich and varied experience. People have, or at least should have, great respect for members of the legislature who are their elected representatives. The latter are not only supposed to safeguard

CURRENTS AND CROSSCURRENTS

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times longer than an hour. Do these members consider that once they are elected, their responsibility in attending the parliament regularly is over? Are their duties towards their constituents being carried out with fairness, justice and impartiality?

These are some of the questions that agitate minds of the common people. Let us take even a cursory look at our legislators. The majority of them are wealthy, mostly industrialists and business people. During the British regime and for some considerable period thereafter politicians used to be drawn mostly from among the ranks of lawyers, litterateurs, insolvent patriots, hereditary landlords and others. But why has there been a qualitative change? Because, the principal criteria now for nominating a candidate by a political party is his or her ability or prospect of winning the election. The question of commitment to the ideals, dedication to party programs, quality and duration of the service rendered to the party etc. are relegated to a secondary position. Now to win election one needs money and muscle power. If you have money, or can procure it from other sources, muscle can be arranged easily.

This has regrettably been the characteristics of our politics for the past two decades at least and is widely known to people, much to their chagrin. Those who spend that much money for election, they obviously do so with the hope of

parliament. But no such statement was submitted when they left office. This should have been done. And also, as practiced in many countries, such statements should have been made public so that people would have full knowledge of the legitimate income of such leaders. This would, evidently, bridle the greed and corruption of many such people.

People do not want their parliamentary representatives to be deeply engrossed with whatever they are not supposed to do. They are normally provided with funds for development in their constituency. They must use these funds in a fair, just and equitable manner. But do they actually do that, except some honorable members. The legislation made by the legislators

status as well as newly acquired administrative and financial power to enjoy authority beyond its limits by bullying local administration. They, in turn, get involved with cadres, who tarnish the image of their respective political parties by way of indulging in unlawful activities. The opposition members of the parliament cannot, however, exercise undue influence on local administration, for obvious reasons. But they seek to maintain their traditional cadres, though with understandable difficulties.

The government is generally aware of the misuse of power and unlawful activities of political leaders, but unfortunately fails to implement the decision to curb them. Pakistan government added last year some conditions to the

increase the nature and standard of service of the parliamentarians. One may also note that during the past two decades there have been successive changes of government, because the party in power generally becomes unpopular due mostly to the excesses committed by their leaders or cronies. This is a lesson to learn for the major ruling parties, especially the ruling party. A strict control over the party stalwarts and legislators, who tarnish the image of the party, would make the party popular and increase its chances of returning to power.

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Shattered credibility of "road map"

BILLY I AHMED

PALESTINIANS are butchered mercilessly by Israelis. No matter whether it is a child, or a young expectant mother like Fatima Abed-Rabo, who had to give birth to a child in a taxi as the Israeli military blocked the road. "We cut the umbilical cord with a razor blade" she said. Barely three pounds in weight, blue and critical in condition, the baby was dead by the time they arrived at the hospital.

After the failure of Oslo Accord, perhaps the Aqaba summit saw some light at the end of tunnel for the Palestinians against such brutality by the Israelis. But the aftermath of June 4 Aqaba summit has been followed by a fortnight of bloody conflict. It is reported that over 60 died in seven-day period -- the highest weekly death rate since the present Intifada began. The carnage has shattered the credibil-

ity of the so-called "Road Map" for a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians.

The American pretense of impartiality has once again been exposed by events, revealing Washington to be the apologist and sponsor of Israel's efforts to crush resistance to its occupation of the bulk of the territories seized in the 1967 war. The Road Map has been shown to be a scheme to establish a

The June 8 military operation mounted by Hamas Islamic Jihad and the Al Aqsa Brigade against an Israeli army base in Gaza was retaliated by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon by launching a series of targeted assassinations of Hamas personnel. These assassinations guaranteed to incite revenge and provide a pretext for further acts of Israeli repression.

The attempted assassination of

"Such a campaign is, of course, the outcome of long preparations, which take weeks and months. It was evidently planned even before the Aqaba summit conference convened, but postponed by Sharon in order to afford President Bush his moments of photographic glory on the shore of the Red Sea. Immediately after the president and his entourage went home, radiant with success, the machinery of death went into action.

states -- one Jewish and one Palestinian -- as

an alternative to the plan to establish a Greater Israel favoured by Sharon and the rightist forces who support him. They have made this their aim ever since the Oslo accords of 1993, and they far outnumber the extremist elements that view any settlement with the Palestinians as a surrender of the biblical homeland of the Jews.

The Jewish people in Israel would still be surrounded by hostile forces on all sides, and continue to be seen as the puppets of US imperialism and a force for reaction in the Middle East. Israeli society would continue to be dominated by zealots and right-wing extremists intent on smashing up the social gains made since 1948 and imposing the brutal austerity measures demanded by big business.

A downright nascent outlook is required if peace is to be secured, one based not on the separation of Arab and Israeli, Muslim and Jew, but their political unification. Jewish workers and intellectuals who desire peace with their Arab neighbours must understand that this is incompatible with support for the Zionist state. They must champion instead the unity of Jews and Arabs on a democratic secular and socialist basis.

For the Palestinians, it is essential to understand that genuine liberation cannot be achieved through a nationalist strategy that does not challenge the social and economic system of capitalism and the imperialist set-up in the region that are the root causes of their oppression.

The Road Map is only the latest prescription of a failed perspective that cannot provide a solution for the democratic and social aspirations of either the Palestinian or Israeli working people.

What it appears now is that the US-backed "road map" is an olive branch offered to the Palestinians. There has been a breach of truce by the Israelis. For instance the release of prisoners was one of the preconditions stipulated by Palestinian groups when they announced a cease fire at the fag end of June.

The shrewd Sharon availed the call by releasing 350 prisoners (5% out of some 6000 rotting in jail without any trial in inhuman conditions. According to a report filed by the AFP last month, Hisham Abdelrazeq said the following in an interview with army radio, "If the Israeli government does not make the decision that it is prepared in principle to free all, Palestinian Authority will withdraw from implementing the road map".

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ghetto policed by a puppet Palestinian Authority, the Israeli defence force and, possibly, an international military presence led by the US.

Hamas political leader Abd-al-Aziz al-Rantissi in Gaza city on June 10 provoked a pre-emptive response -- the June 11 suicide bombing of a Jerusalem bus by Hamas that left 17 dead and many injured.

But Sharon's intent was precisely to undermine the new Palestinian Prime Minister, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen). Abbas said to be a Washington's creation, the State Department hopes to use him to bring the Intifada to an end and force the Palestinians to accept an apartheid-style Bantustan in the guise of a "viable state."

For this reason, the targeted killings -- Israel's euphemism for political assassinations -- have continued on a daily basis, leading to the deaths of over half a dozen Hamas activists and many more bystanders.

Israel has acknowledged that it has turned an existing "contingency plan" volatile by going after the top leaders of Islamic opposition movements, using the excuse of Hamas breaking off talks with Abbas on a ceasefire. But most observers believe that Hamas and other dissidents could have been brought back to negotiations, once they had registered a protest at Abbas' description of opposition to Israeli occupation as terrorism during the Aqaba summit.

In a comment, former Israeli MP Uri Avneri, the leader of the Gush Shalom-Peace Block movement, said of the targeting of Rantissi and others, "Clearly, this was the beginning of a campaign to kill the leaders of all the wings of Hamas -- military, political, social, educational and religious.

"The killing of the Hamas leaders (together with their wives, children and casual bystanders) is intended to attain the following results: (a) acts of revenge by Hamas, i.e., suicide bombings, (b) the failure of the Palestinian Authority's efforts to secure the agreement of Hamas to a ceasefire, (c) the destruction of Abu Mazen's political standing right from the start, (d) the demolition of the road map, (e) compensation for the settlers after the removal of some sham 'outposts.'"

"All five objectives have been achieved."

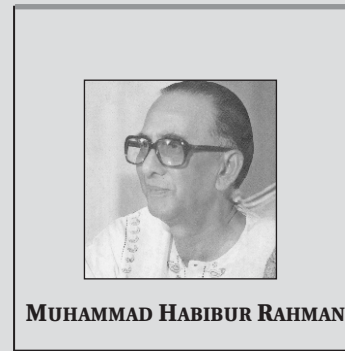
Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom stated of his Washington and Europe parting: "The Americans agree with us and know that the political settlement process cannot be a prisoner of the armed extremist groups, which must be dismantled... The Europeans understand that these groups are threatening the world balance, and it is not just a phenomenon that specifically concerns Israel."

Sharon iterated that Israel would continue to target "ticking bombs" and has since won the support of the Knesset for his stand.

Few, including Bush and Sharon, believe Abu Mazen has the military capacity or the required support to crush popular resistance to Israeli occupation. In recent days thousands of Palestinians have marched through Gaza's streets chanting "bombardment for bombardment and blood for blood."

The peace movement and broad sections of the working class in Israel support the creation of two

An Yearning For A Sound-Piercing Arrow



MUHAMMAD HABIBUR RAHMAN

The sweet and melodious tom-tom sound
Wafts rhythmically from around
From the Santal village.
You can hear Ravana's rampage and pillage
Bhisma's roars and rages with no rhyme or reason
From the village operas of the harvest season.
They do not hurt your ears.
They do not jar on your ears.
The sweet and melodious tom-tom sound
Wafts rhythmically from around
From the Santal village.
All over the country the mikes are used freely
They are nonchalant and are used very cheerily.
With no restraint or limits as to time or decibel.
If they cry hoarse and yell hell
There is nothing to stop them or quell.

The mikes are used for reciting scriptures
With religious and devotional raptures.
They are used by the politicians and peddlers
By the political hecklers and social meddlers.
The mikes are used for selling to the hypochondriacs
Various herbs and concoctions of aphrodisiacs.

The decibel is everywhere above one hundred and thirty.
And the noise-pollution is also hideously dirty.
The heart-patient is hurt in the hospital
And suffers an uneasy little spasm,
Only the young couple unperturbed in their orgasm.

I sometimes yearn, I fervently do yearn,
I must have a shabdabhedhi baan,
A sound-piercing arrow that finds out from around
The target by the target's own sound.

A shabdabhedhi baan,
Had I had one
I would have pierced the sound
Of all the mikes and amplifiers around.

King Dasharatha, the father of Rama of the Ramayana fame,
Had an arrow by the shavdavedi name.
From afar he seemed to have heard the sound
Of a young elephant's drinking water somewhere around.
The king shot his arrow and hit the son, of a blind sage,
Who was filling the pitcher in the stream, and in outrage
The sage cursed that the King would suffer the same sorrow
Caused to him by the King Dasharath's shavdavedi arrow.

Remembering King Dasharatha, on a second thought
I decided that I should not
Have a sound-piercing arrow.

Just like any other person
After having in possession
Of a sound-piercing arrow,
I might turn out to be a pharaoh.
I may then pierce the tom-toms in the Santal village
I may ban Ravana's rampage and pillage
And Bhisma's roarings and rages
From all the jattras, operas and the stages.

After seeing so much of oddities
The eyes still like to turn a blind eye to the crudities.
After hearing so much of odd harsh and hoarse sound
The ears still like to turn a deaf ear and compound.

If the mikes are bursting again in blares,
Then have patience or put your fingers in your ears.

Muhammad Habibur Rahman is former Chief Justice and head of caretaker government

Billy I Ahmed is a researcher.