

JS committees have a case

They need more authority

THE JS standing committees and the ministries concerned have not had a smooth working relationship. They have often been at loggerheads. In this context, chairmen of some committees have sought more authority vis-a-vis the ministries through an amendment to the constitution and the rules of procedure of parliament, so that they can perform their oversight role effectively.

The oversight functions of the standing committees are an integral part of parliamentary democracy, while the government has the prerogative to execute its policies and carry out the day-to-day administration of the country. But it must be seen whether the execution has been timely, transparent and cost-effective. Overseeing, on the other hand, must not hinder the normal functioning of the executive. In other words, a balance must be struck between the two in order that the JS standing committees can effectively perform their watchdog role and the executive functions of the government are discharged without hindrance.

To tell the truth, the executive has always had a free ride as the committee system could not develop to its full potential, thanks to boycott of parliament and the committees and politicisation of JS bodies. As a matter of fact, the committees have had a roller-coaster ride since the 1990's. Certain gray areas therefore remain in the equations or the working patterns between the JS bodies and the ministries.

Having acknowledged that kind of systemic imbalance and opacity, we would like to say that the demands raised by the standing committees for greater functional authority are justified. The ministries must cooperate with the committees as they work and be willing to implement their recommendations.

The problems arising due to the absence of a well-developed system of working must be sorted out amicably. The ministries feel that the JS bodies are at times 'intrusive' in their bid to gather papers, documents and information. Of course, any debilitating intrusion into the day-to-day functioning of the ministries must be avoided. But then the question remains whether the problems are cropping up because of any deviation from the set procedure or its absence altogether.

We fully endorse the demands of the standing committees and urge the government to get a move on to empower them.

Dhaka-Yangon accords

Engagement with eastern neighbour good augury

THE three memorandums of understanding signed by Bangladesh and Myanmar this week usher in a new era of cooperation between the two neighbouring countries that can only be expected to benefit both parties. Our ties with our only immediate neighbour other than India have long been neglected, and it is encouraging to see that good relations between Dhaka and Yangon have been made a priority by the government.

The benefits to accrue from greater bilateral cooperation between the two countries are considerable. The most important of the three MOUs signed has to do with the construction of a direct link-road between the two capital cities to facilitate trade and mobility between the two countries. The other two MOUs signed, on agricultural cooperation and diplomatic status, are significant symbolic measures that indicate the direction bilateral relations are expected to take.

The benefits of the agreed upon link-road between Dhaka and Yangon are readily apparent. Greater cross-border trade and communication can only lower the cost of doing business and help to open up each country's markets to the other, which will in turn expand both economies. In addition, the road link will facilitate mobility between the two countries which will go a long way to fostering cooperation, understanding, and communication on a number of levels. Finally, this agreement can be seen as helping to further cement and facilitate our ties to the rest of the ASEAN region.

In fact, Bangladesh might stand to gain more from the deal than Myanmar. The prospective bridge over the Naf river between the two countries further underlines the opportunities for investment and technical assistance that are available to us in Myanmar. With greater cooperation on issues of crucial bilateral importance, expanded trade and investment opportunities, and an opening to the rest of Southeast Asia, better ties with Yangon are a no-lose proposition. Let us hope that the MOUs signed are merely the first in a series of cooperative initiatives that have the potential to benefit both countries.

Non-plussed at the bestiality of crimes



M ABDUL HAFIZ

country the businessmen are subjected to a wave of abduction, extortion and killing. Only in last two months seven businessmen were killed under different circumstances in old Dhaka alone. Never before the community felt so insecure dealing severe blow to the country's economic activity.

Before the trauma of a ghastly attack on Humayun Azad is over

rivers of tears. It is just sickening and the nation is indeed gasping to understand if it is harking back to dark age and has opted for primitive society.

There can be an equation for abduction of a businessman a rational for holding them at ransom and even a diabolical compulsion for killing them at times. But the mutation of a deadbody? Shredding it

guishable. But this is not for what the country was created and three million people courted martyrdom. It is a great irony today that a nation that fought against insurmountable odds for freedom is to capitulate before a handful of criminals: the terrorists, extortionists and bandits. It is a pity that the establishment of the day cannot give the

Where do we go from here? A

PERSPECTIVES

This is a new war, a unique war. This is the war against the forces of evils. And the nation cannot afford to fail, for its future as well as wellbeing of the millions in the country are hinged to how we fare in this war against the criminals... We are non-plussed, flabbergasted at the bestiality which must stop. Let us lay the bricks of the foundation of a civilised society free from the intimidation of marauders invisibly stalking our city streets and countryside.

the Shamsul Huq episode in which he and his son Russel Seikh went missing before they were brutally killed has baffled the people as never before. They wonder how many more deaths are yet to occur in this manner provoking still more number of deaths and, of course, causing mountain of grief and

like a vulture? It immediately points to a pervert mind with an animal instinct which is behind such bestiality. This instinct which pushes the society to the brink of dehumanisation is precisely the cause for concern. For it renders the human conscience dysfunctional making for it wrongs and rights indistin-

nation anything in this regard except empty promises with its chronic inability to ensure security and order.

Consequently the criminals enjoy field day in this country as they face no organised challenge from any quarter. The government is content and busy with its hum-

silver lining is witnessed in the initiative of old Dhaka businessmen. In the prevailing bleak situation they, in a pioneering effort, have united to fight themselves the scourge of killing, extortion and abduction.

A few other professional groups also have followed the suit. While

Waiting for April



M.J. AKBAR

figure thanks to Raghu Rai's superb photography of her work in the Bihar famine), and the government of India was begging for food from Washington, granted under a scheme called PL 480. Language riots had ripped through the fabric of unity. Muslims were under assault in riots engineered by Congress governments in the states, after the Congress government in the Centre had wounded them malevolently during the 1965 war with Pakistan. Prairie

1977 was as dark as 1971 was light. And in that darkness, the Indian electorate proved its enchanting strength. If the Emergency of 1975 threatened the end of democracy, then the 1977 elections confirmed that no dictator would ever rule India again. A Janata government replaced Indira Gandhi, and after a year of promise began to defy common sense. The pendulum reversed. The 1980 elections were a sharp vote against irresponsibility and

switch occurred when both Prime Minister Vajpayee and Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani asked the country to examine the issue of foreign origin as political question rather than a personal one, and in calm rather than accusatory tones.

Sonia Gandhi's text was neatly trapped by context. The BJP created a sophisticated two-phase campaign that first established the central theme of the battleground, and then swivelled the battle into a presidential con-

With so many shysters around, the credibility of opinion polls was bound to suffer. But there is one opinion that remains unwavering, no matter who measures it. In any comparison between Vajpayee and Sonia Gandhi the difference in favour of Vajpayee is either 70:30 or even greater. That indicates two things: the voter's comfort levels with a very Indian Vajpayee, and his unease with Sonia Gandhi.

BYLINE

fires lit by the Naxalites had spread across the country. The young had no hope, the elders were eyeless. The Congress lost every state from Punjab to Bengal and would have lost Delhi as well if the South had not saved it.

1971, in complete contrast, was startlingly optimistic as 1967 was dismal. Indira Gandhi merged hope with vision. The first breakthroughs of the Green Revolution promised an India that was self-sufficient in food. Food would eliminate poverty. Indira Gandhi challenged the traditional elites, and taunted them with people's power. Her slogan was perfect for its moment: "Woh kahte hain Indra hatao, main kahti hoon Gharibi hatao." They want to remove Indira, I want to remove poverty. It is a message that still resonates in the hearts of those under the poverty line. It was perfect positioning: the popular champion as victim of the manipulators. (Those Congress leaders who have devised the silly slogan "Anyone But Vajpayee" obviously have no idea of history. To demonise a popular leader for no given reason is utterly counterproductive.) The 1971 results were an upheaval.

bad governance. Indira Gandhi returned to power. What no one realised at the moment of her second triumph was that she had become fundamentally flawed. Hubris ran havoc; dynasty was established; and misjudgment bred secession in Punjab, arguably India's most patriotic state. The desecration of the Akal Takht led directly to the assassination of Indira Gandhi; anger and sympathy gave Rajiv Gandhi the largest mandate in Indian history, in an election whose consistent image was fire. The fires of revolt were replaced by the fire of a gun, Bofors: Rajiv was painted in the lurid colours of corruption, and his image could never recover. The results of 1989 said it all. The Nineties were consumed by different kinds of fire, of casteism and communalism. And the election of 1999 was held in the shadows of Kargil.

2004 then is the first "normal" election in nearly 40 years. Are you surprised that the voter should be relieved, and indeed feel good about the absence of hysteria? The young, instead of being urged to go to some war or the other, are being promised peace and development. They

test between Vajpayee and Sonia Gandhi. "India Shining" was attacked from the wrong end. The Congress challenged the shine, but the slogan was about India far more than it was about India's economy. The difference might be subtle, but it is vital. It was less about the truth, and more about the promise. The BJP used a partial fact (the statistics of its last phase in power) to promote a vision: Indians can turn India into a developed nation. The Congress had nothing in place when the campaign broke. The BJP literally walked into empty space in the popular imagination.

The only message that the Congress had communicated in five years was that it wanted Sonia Gandhi as Prime Minister, but no one was told why, or how this would make India and Indians better off. It was cult worship of the flimsiest kind, because it was built around vulnerability.

Most of this vulnerability would have been erased if Sonia Gandhi had shown the leadership needed to resurrect the Congress. Uniquely, the party has shrunk under her despite being out of power. Normally, a party grows when out of office. The fact is that Sonia Gandhi lost the election two years ago, when she could not

Rajiv Gandhi became a candidate for Prime Minister.

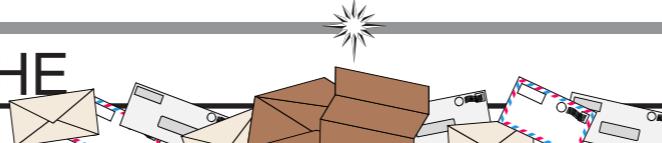
Sonia Maino could have become a naturalised Indian when she married Rajiv and became a Gandhi in 1968. But she filed an application to remain a foreigner for five years, as she was permitted by Indian law to do. Even in 1973 she was not convinced that she wanted to be an Indian rather than an Italian. She applied for another five years as foreign resident, as she did again in 1978. It was only in the last week of her permit in 1983, when Rajiv Gandhi was heir apparent, that she asked for an Indian passport. These facts may mean very little to some of us, but they mean a great deal to a lot of us. In any case, they are fodder for the BJP propaganda machine, which is currently in very high gear. Other questions will be raised as well.

With so many shysters around, the credibility of opinion polls was bound to suffer. But there is one opinion that remains unwavering, no matter who measures it. In any comparison between Vajpayee and Sonia Gandhi the difference in favour of Vajpayee is either 70:30 or even greater. That indicates two things: the voter's comfort levels with a very Indian Vajpayee, and his unease with Sonia Gandhi.

For five years the government lulled the Congress by saying little and doing nothing about the foreign origins of Sonia Gandhi. They were waiting for April 2004.

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TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE



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Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

How to be popular!

As a layman, I guess the regime will regain some popularity if it acts on principle in some of these areas:

-- Announce a modular plan for constructing on top priority basis the natural gas pipeline network in the Northern region, starting with Rajshahi via Bogra Natore and Seraigunj. This gas network has been delayed by two decades, and the politicians are infighting on the export issue. The North has to be industrialised; and energy from coal is not enough. The step motherly treatment has been going for generations. There is North-South communication gap. Where are the concept papers on this topic? The rail link over the Jamuna Bridge took decades. Why this go-slow policy? The Sunderbans is getting priority while cottage industries are not encouraged in the northern districts.

-- Dismantle Rajuk and BTTB, and have new foundations with fresh talents and expertise. Too much centralization, with too little professional processing and output. There are too many development agencies for the metropolis. Too many posts, files, and trips huge waste of time.

Change the city corporation (municipalities) structure and system of working, and go for a modern system of management and administration (plenty of international advice and technical cooperation available). Accept urban migration in the LDCs as a fact of modern life (the majority will be in the cities within two decades, according to an international survey, DS March 26). All the top posts should not go to politicians. The latter are just not interested in management and running systems, and indulge in subjective interference.

-- Modernize the civil service and bureaucracy. The separation

of the judiciary is being delayed intentionally by internal vested groups (political and civil service). Decentralize quickly.

-- Introduce One-Stop Service. Set up centres at the divisional headquarters with fewer trips to Dhaka metropolis. Do the same at the district HQs in the next phase.

The counter service at the government offices is poor and amateurish, due to lack of motivation and training. Remember one strong point: our density of population is around 1,000 per sq. km, one of the highest in the world. Spread the public service network. At present it is too concentrated, encouraging graft, nepotism and other vices.

-- Bureaucracy has to be computerized, for faster processing and less corruption. The computer cannot lie, once it is properly programmed ('your most obedient servant', with less human element in the net). Note the difference between the computerized

telephone bills and electric bills controlled by dishonest meter readers. There are solutions when you are interested in the solutions. The prepaid Cards are popular in the telephone business less paper work, faster accounting, no billing and collection.

-- Field and outdoor working staff must have uniform for identification. It encourages discipline, uniformity, and formality. Why we do not like formality in the public sector? The queuing system is fast gaining popularity.

Abdul Khan
Dhaka

Two books

This letter is in response to Yasmeen Murshed's introduction of two books by MJ Akbar under the caption 'Jehad and Fanaticism' published in the Point Counterpoint on March 20, 04 issue of The Daily Star. First of all, I express my gratitude for letting

me know about the 'The Shade of Swords'. I shall now procure a copy of the same. It always gives me pleasure to read books containing critical analysis of religions, particularly Islam as I am a Muslim by birth. I have found that any book, article, essay having adverse comments against Islam is never tolerated and often banned in countries inhabited by Muslims in majority. Muslims who live in developed countries also hardly cultivate freethinking. The result is intolerance and clash with others who hold different views and faiths.

Other religions may have many tenets that Muslims do not accept, but that does not justify propagation of intolerance and militancy in the name of religion.

Ahmed Shah

Dharmundi

Role of opposition

Bangladesh is not a large country

in the world map. Its area is very small but its population is very big. We achieved independence 33 years ago, but we have failed to develop a viable political culture. The main opposition party has expressed it vindictive mood through setting April 30 as the deadline for ousting the government. It is an unlawful and immoral demand that very few people will endorse.

What we are watching is not democracy, it's anarchy. People cast their valuable votes for the ruling alliance to run the country for five years, not 30 months. I want to express my personal opinion that all the opposition political parties should have joined the parliament sessions in order to expose the weaknesses of the government. The present political stalemate could be brought to an end if all the political parties were willing to do so. Without the participation of the opposition, parliament loses its efficacy.

Under the circumstances, we cannot expect the country to make any progress as people are living in a state of fear. I appeal to the main opposition to realise the gravity of the situation and help the government in running the country. Hartal is a fatal malady that must be banished in order to rescue the nation.

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Opposition stand
In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of United Nations it is clearly stated how a democratic government should govern its own people.

Article 21. (1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives (2) Everyone has

the right of equal access to public service in his country. (3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures. Looks like the opposition party leaders are trying to make an exception of this right for their own interest ie Power.

Do they ever visualize the same exception may be demanded by their opposition when they come into power by the vote of the people. Are these not politics of self interest, confusion, violation of Human Rights, destruction, and deaths?

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