

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

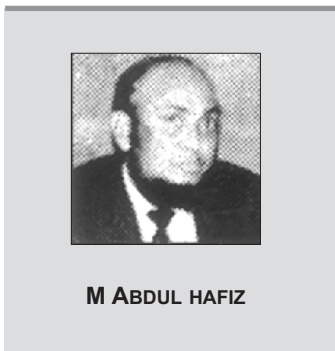
THE three memorandums of understanding signed by Bangladesh and Myanmar this week usher in a new era of cooperation between the two neighbouring countries that can only be expected to benefit both parties. Our ties with our only immediate neighbour other than India have long been neglected, and it is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



THE mortal remains of old Dhaka businessman and his son have lately been recovered from Gazipur in more than two hundred pieces. The end of ephemeral life is inevitable. But no one would like to see such ignominious end! The nation is agast at the brutality and a shockwave runs across the country. The baffled populace looks askance just how many more tragedies of this magnitude will it witness and how frequently. It's mind-boggling to understand the psyche that is at work behind the heinous crime which is ominously not the solitary event of this kind. All over the

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 diabolic compulsion for killing them at times. But the mutilation 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

bugs and hyperbole while the opposition plays its anachronistic inconsequential and bankrupt politics and both engages each other with blistering blame and counter blame. Nothing can be more congenial for the criminals to flourish who find this country a safe haven for perpetuating their heinous objectives. Where do we go from here? A

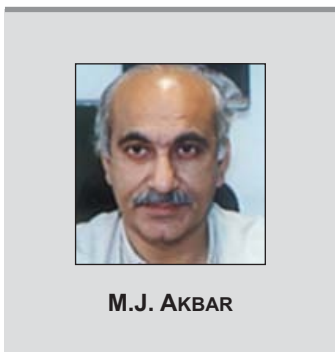
we wish them luck more and more resistance to crime must build up with the courage and determination with which the intrepid freedom fighters once faced the heavily armed occupation forces. This is a new war, a unique war. This is the war against the forces of evils. And the nation cannot afford to fail, 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. Let the public ire explode on them like an erupting volcano so that we can usher in a new dawn of reassurance.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.

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Waiting for April



ONE must never confuse elections with electioneering. Many journalists get elections wrong because they report electioneering, rather than elections. This is not their fault. Media is a hungry monster, and its appetite extends from *chutney* and *achar* to the daily sacrifice of a suitable victim. A report on the elections would be merely one day's story. But electioneering is a constant source of fun: statements, replies, offence, counterattack, allegation, exaggeration, mistakes. It's a carnival. In India, it's a Russian circus, packed with trapeze artists swinging dangerously from party to party (a few reversing direction in mid-air); clowns chanting gibberish; and celebrities prancing on horses. The knives are out: slow movers wield their weapons to stab in the back; the clever types puncture egos with concealed stilettos. The stakes could not be higher, and ethics are not a priority requirement in this game. It's nice if you have them, but not at the cost of defeat.

Why would reporting elections be minimalist? Because the essence of an election is not controlled by the din of the campaign, but the response to one or two questions that address dominant concerns. Such questions are often obvious.

This is the first election since 1962 without a dramatic backdrop. 1967 was a bitter and chaotic contest between main and fringe parties within a stark, sullen and despairing electorate. There was famine across the north (Mother Teresa became a national

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

would be idiotic not to feel the difference. Atal Behari Vajpayee has not become an icon of the MTV generation by accident. I hope though that he has written out a personal thank you note to the Opposition.

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-

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. Nationalism is a very powerful impetus, and Sonia Gandhi does not understand that it takes more than a passport to make you a claimant for the job of Prime Minister of India. Moreover, that passport was taken only when

take advantage of Gujarat. India was not shining then, as Vajpayee himself admitted in Parliament. That was the weak moment of the government, and it was given a chance to reinvent itself.

Every government promises prosperity. Vajpayee is the first Prime Minister since Jawaharlal Nehru to promise peace with Pakistan. Through Saarc he has linked this peace to economic growth as well, but the deeper focus is on the return of human relationships in our subcontinent. This is slowly becoming a primal motivator for key sections of the electorate. Pakistani commentators have written at the surprise of visiting Indians at the warmth they received during the cricket games. They have pointed out Pakistanis stopped the game of demonising Indians some time ago. Something even more startling is happening in India. Since 1965, confrontation with Pakistan has been the bread and butter of political rhetoric. The BJP has been in the forefront of such politics. Even the most quiescent of doves would not have dared to dream in 1999 that peace could actually become a vote-winner. The implicit question is: can Sonia Gandhi deliver peace with Pakistan, which, if it ever comes, can only emerge through a difficult and delicate process?

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.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

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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 as 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 Indira 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.

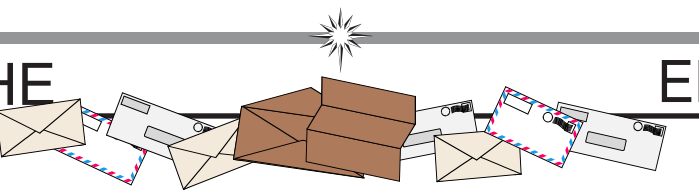
Having established the theme of positive nationalism, the BJP has switched the debate from the general to the specific. Any good marketing man will tell that macro has to be backed by micro; that the product is nothing without a credible delivery mechanism. The

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.

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

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



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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 Serajgunj. 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 BTBT, 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.

Abdus 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
Dhanmondi

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 its 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.

Rafiqul Islam
English Department
Karatia Sadaat College,
Tangail

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? **Golam F Akhter**
Convener, Bangladesh-USA Human Rights Coalition.
Maryland, USA