

Is it possible to break our parliamentary deadlock?



M. M. REZAUL KARIM

WE pride in calling ours a democratic country, but one needs to measure how well or badly we practice democracy. It is true we are an infant democracy. We have to learn bit by bit. But do we have all the elements of democracy and how much we really value democracy? One cannot but admit that we have all the tools and ability for democracy but regretfully not the sincere wish to use them. The people, particularly the older generation, who witnessed the war of liberation, are utterly dejected at the widening gap between our expectation then and its realisation or lack of it later.

The principal forum of democracy is the parliament. It forms government and enacts laws. It is there that the state policies are formulated and measures taken to implement those. It raises revenue and authorises expenditure. It gives guidance to the executive in governance as well as supervises them and controls their actions in almost all spheres of public activities. The scope and dimension of parliamentary functions have expanded in an evolutionary manner. But have we been able to run the parliament the way it should run?

Our story is a grim record of disillusionment and depredation. The responsibility lies, it is sad to say, with us, representing all the major political parties that have ruled the country so long. From the very beginning of our statehood, hardly with any exception, parliamentary elections were held to pick up the chosen candidates of the rulers of the day. It was much later, since 1991, that parliamentary elections were conducted, by

and large, in a free, fair and impartial manner. Having made this remarkable achievement, we bogged down on the subsequent steps that are necessary to complete the process of democracy.

To conduct business the parliamentarians obviously have to attend parliamentary sessions. Since 1991, the then parties in opposition stayed away from sessions for months together. The

advanced by the erstwhile opposition party, the Awami League, earlier. Now, also after the 2001 election, the same drama was enacted, this time again by the opposition Awami League, which has been abstaining from the sessions for almost 90 days. The reasons or excuses were more or less the same as those of the ruling party when it was in the opposition. It seems we have now developed a political culture, not merely of confrontational politics,

ans to attend parliament needs no special reasoning. The citizens voted their lawmakers to frame legislation, govern the country and promote socio-economic development. However, those members who are in the government generally enjoy these facilities. But those who are in the opposition also have a definite role to play and provide positive inputs by way of making constructive suggestions to arrive at the most appropriate decisions on matters

rejected by the opposition and he went back dejected. Next, representatives of the two parties met at the residence of a third party, Ambassador of a friendly country. It flopped at the last moment because of the failure of the then opposition to turn up on the final session.

Then, during the Awami League regime, there was direct negotiation between the two parties through mediation of Speaker

created instability in the country. The continued demand for the resignation of the government and for a mid-term election remains unheeded. Yet the opposition is determined to go ahead with its movement. The nation is, no doubt, faced with many problems, some being grave. The recently defeated BJP in Indian election magnanimously pledged the victorious Congress party all cooperation. On the other hand, the vanquished in Bangladesh's last election vowed to create problems for the victor from the very beginning of their tenure. What a contrast? What a pity?

In Bangladesh, it has now become difficult to make the two adversaries sit together. However, we witnessed with admiration that the two arch rivals, India and Pakistan, sat together to settle their disputes over which they went to war. And more recently, Germany's Chancellor Gerhard Shroeder was invited by the French President Jacques Chirac at the commemoration of the Second World War's Normandy invasion in presence of the American President and the British Queen... Then what prevents our leaders to sit together in a bid to promote understanding on a comparatively mundane affair?

But one may argue that even if the two parties are made to sit together, without genuine desire nothing could be accomplished. One may bring the horse to water, but one cannot make him drink. Similarly, one may advance a host of arguments in order to mitigate the fear and apprehensions of wrong-doing by the other. But, if there is a hidden agenda, no amount of logic would budge a party from its pre-determined stand. However, one feels that the glare of cameramen and publicity media might tend to make the two parties more rigid. In that case, the other alternative would be a third party mediation or facilitation, in a clandestine manner, by those who matter to both. But who is to bell the cat? A million dollar question.

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CURRENTS AND CROSSCURRENTS

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reasons advanced were, curiously, the same by both the major political parties, the BNP and the Awami League, respectively while in opposition. They contended that their members were not allowed enough time to speak and sometimes not to speak at all. They boycotted parliamentary sessions, rendering them ineffective. The parliament was not legally ineffective, but it lost the moral ground to carry on business without the voice of the opposition which, in effect, is the essence of democracy. Often, they alleged that the Speaker was not impartial. Yet, people in general are of the opinion that the grounds for boycotting parliamentary sessions are flimsy, unjust and extremely harmful for democracy and the nation. The constituents remain unrepresented in the highest state forum to which they had elected their political representatives.

The election of February 1996 was totally boycotted by the major opposition party, the Awami League, obviously on political grounds. But following the June 1996 election, the principal political party in opposition, this time the BNP, also abstained for long from the parliament largely furnishing the same reasons

but of non-cooperational politics.

This politics of non-cooperation has stemmed for the unwelcome attitude of intolerance, greed, envy and genuine lack of respect for the principles and precepts of democracy. There is a total absence of the spirit of understanding and the will to resolve differences through dialogue. The differences professed by the two sides on various issues are not insurmountable and can be resolved through negotiations, given the will to do so. But the genuine desire to reach a compromise by holding talks does not appear to exist. Here lies the crux of the problem. The opposition, now as in the past, became impatient and wanted to grab power before the incumbent government completes its mandated tenure of office. To meet such a demand is, no doubt, undemocratic and unconstitutional, even if the government failed to govern the nation. But to determine the quality of governance is the prerogative of the citizens, who will give their verdict at the polls during the subsequent election. No one section of citizens enjoys that privilege.

The duty of the parliamentari-

of national interest. The voters would expect their representatives use the parliamentary forum to discuss national issues in general and those which affect them or their constituencies in particular. Continued absence would be tantamount to breaking the trust reposed in the elected legislators. The only punitive measure consists in the loss of membership on account of prolonged absence for 90 working days. But one can evade this provision by coming to the parliament on the 90th day or before, save membership and continue to enjoy remuneration and all the perks that go with the membership. Critics observe the provision of 90 days needs to be cut down drastically. But will it help?

When the nation faced such problems in the past, various methods were employed to resolve the crisis. The first such effort was made by a third party at the behest of the Commonwealth Secretary General, Chief Emeka Anyaoku. He dispatched his representative, the reputed Australian juror and politician, Sir Ninian Stephens, in 1994 to settle dispute between the ruling BNP and the opposition Awami League. He worked hard for a month as a "Facilitator". Unfortunately, his formula was

Humayun Rasheed Chowdhury. The opposition BNP was brought back to the parliament, though the truce broke in no time. Finally, immediately after the election of October 2001 the good offices of several Heads of Diplomatic Mission ventured as a mission to resolve some problems. The Opposition Awami League first alleged heavy rigging in the election and rejected its outcome. Then they refused to take oath of office as parliamentarians. Then they refused to join the parliamentary sessions. The Envoys met with leaders of the two major political parties separately at the residences of two chosen party leaders. These problems were resolved but some other substantive ones remained and gave rise to many other problems, finally present boycott of the parliamentary sessions.

What then are the steps that can be taken to mitigate the situation? The need for that became more acute on account of the decision of the opposition to take the issues outside the parliament, in the streets. It took the form of an anti-government movement with the consequent chaos, conflict, violence and bloodshed. The forcible hartals resulted in enormous loss to the economy and

The Arab League: A forgotten ideal

FATIMA CHOWDHURY

THE concept of the Arab League emerged in 1942 when the British wanted to bring together the Arab-speaking nations into a unified fold and as an advantageous force against the existing Axis powers -- Germany, Italy, and Japan. It was not until March 1945 and the near end of World War II that the vision of an Arab organisation became a concrete reality. The political scene in the Middle East was changing with the struggle against remaining colonial rulers intensifying as Arab nations sought independence and the power to chart their own destiny. The issue of Palestine and the creation of a Jewish state also gained momentum and would later become the stumbling block to any initiative for peace and stability in the region. Therefore the creation of an Arab League was a consequence of the time when Arab unity was seen as a necessity to address and search for viable solutions to issues that plagued the whole region.

The Arab League summit is held twice a year with the objective to strengthen ties among its 22 member nations and create uniform policies beneficial to the region. But there is always a difference between what is envisioned and the eventual reality. Though the creation of the Arab League was a significant step towards regional cooperation, mutual confidence and state building, it has proven to be a directionless vision, lacking the much needed cooperation and sense of determination from its members to make a difference. The Arab League has become an empty ideal with little relevance, which has been weighed down by the lack of cohesion among its member nations and has thus failed to effectively create policies and become the voice of the Middle East in the global arena.

The Arab League has been able to achieve something good by bringing about a general cooperation at lower levels with a moderate success in preservation of Arabic manuscripts, literacy, cultural exchange between member states, and prompting a more cohesive telecommunication and wireless communication throughout the region. But in the realm of high politics, besides the effective implementation of economic boycott of Israel from 1948 to 1993, the Arab League on the whole has struggled with internal turmoil and divisions. We saw visible cracks during the Cold War phase where some Arab nations endorsed the Soviet bloc while others chose to endorse the United States and its allies. Old hostilities between some member states and challenges from the new republics further obstruct the efficiency of the league with disagreements and

pessimism, brewing a cold war between and amongst the regional so-called small powers.

The Arab League summit scheduled to be held in March 2004 in Tunisia was hastily cancelled two days prior to the event due to differences between Arab nations over political reform being proposed by the Tunisian government in the region. The negative response by some Arab nations to intended political reforms in the region led to controversy and eventual cancellation of the summit by

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Tunisia. Several delegates expected to attend the summit believed the disruption was due to the Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's support to US initiatives to promote reform in the Middle East. Many of the delegates have been less than welcoming to this intrusion by the US into Middle East politics. This emphasises the strain that has long existed among member states and the extent of outside influence in the way the League conducts itself.

On May 22, the summit finally was held as Arabs came together in a show of unity. But the surface had already been ruffled and the cracks and fissures were more than evident. As Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa delivered the opening speech, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi of Libya walked out in protest over Moussa's condemnation of unilateral actions taken by some Arab nations. Libya believed the comments were indirectly referring to the recent termination of their weapons programme and therefore felt the need to boycott the summit. Thereby creating a setback not only for the Arab League but the whole concept of Arab unity.

The agenda at the summit encompasses beyond just the issue of reform to include the on-going Israeli-Palestinian conflict, an

issue that emerges at each summit only to be deliberated by yet another declaration without a feasible solution. Another issue on the agenda is the recent abuse of Iraqi prisoners and excessive force for so-called interrogation used by US soldiers in Iraq. There is no clear uniform condemnation or protest against the abuse scandal and large-scale brutality despite the evidence and anger in the Arab world. Iraq remains in turmoil and the transition to democracy is far from smooth but member nations continue to issue obvious statement about stability and self-governance. The league issues numerous resolutions and many remain simply words on paper without the authority to be enforced and binding upon all members. The League continues to speak in measured whispers where its voice is unheard, its condemnation ignored, and its observations inadequate.

There is a need for realistic introspection that the League has no influence whatsoever in matter of grave concern in the region. While difference is being made on smaller non-political issues, the league remains ineffective on crucial issues that make a huge difference to the affairs of the Middle East in the global arena in respect. The essence of the Arab League is in the unity of Arab nations that come together to accomplish a common good. Instead member nations remain separate entities bringing in differences and agenda that harm the interest of the Middle East as a region and accomplish very little for its people. Declarations are simply visions of what needs to be done and not solutions to the existing problems. Arab nations need to go beyond the usual condemnation and sense of victimisation to create concrete policies and find workable solutions to benefit them.

The future is far from optimistic for the Arab League, which began with a hope and has now fallen into utter despair. Individualism has crept in where there should have been unison, and the concept of the Arab League has been lost in the politics of nation states. A future cannot be sought by merely coming together. There has to be the will to make a difference, the heart to change, and the mind to imagine beyond the borders of confined individualism and benefit. The Arab League is an opportunity that has been left to wither too long and will cease to exist unless there is a sincere effort on the part of the Arab world to genuinely come together to be united to speak in one voice for their region and people.

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